EDITORIAL

¿How to handle authorship disputes?

Team Science and Collaborative research are affected when main researchers see their contributions to a career-defining paper diminished in the author lists. Lab managers, publishers, and funders have tried to devise a fairer system of recognizing individual contributions to scholarly work. One suggestion is to establish a scientific team "pre-agreement", or contract, specifying roles, responsibilities, and conflict resolution processes in advance [1]. "Researchers continue to be judged by what and where they publish," says Liz Allen, Director of strategic initiatives at F1000, an open-access science publisher. "It's critical to their careers, so if they're not getting the credit they deserve and visibility for their work, it's a big problem for them."

"While research is a collaborative endeavor, the job market is highly competitive" adds Anna Hatch, program director at the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), an initiative that recognizes the need to improve the ways in which scholarly research is evaluated. The incentive structure in science impedes progress, she says "Things like collaboration, open science, and reproducibility drive a field forward, but it is numbers of papers, positions in author lists and funding that makes academic careers advance".

Author lists are getting longer, which means it is harder to be a first author. An analysis of 30 million articles included in the Pubmed archive and the MEDLINE database revealed that the mean number of authors went from 1.9 before 1975 to 5.9 during 2015-19 [2]. In their 2016 report "Team Science", a working group from the Academy of Medical Sciences (AMS) concluded that the perceived lack of recognition of their contributions is the main barrier to involvement in collaborative research [3].

Communication is key to avoiding or resolving authorship disputes, and defining credits and authorship criteria, at the beginning and during the process. Recording assigned responsibilities and keeping track of who does what, significantly simplifies the subsequent writing of detailed sections on the contribution of authors to research papers.

One of the main tasks of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) education committee is to reduce unethical behavior. Authorship seems simple, but in practice, it is often difficult. The author list tells readers who has done the work and should ensure that the right people receive credit and take responsibility for the research. Currently, many journals adhere to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), also known as the Vancouver group [4]. The latest version, published in 2001, states that authorship credit must be based solely on:

1. Substantial contributions to conception and design, data acquisition, or data analysis and interpretation.

2. The writing of the article or its critical revision for important intellectual content.

3. Final approval of the version to be published.

Conditions 1, 2, and 3 must all be met. In this sense, it is important to point out that obtaining funding, data collection, and general supervision of the research group do not justify authorship. The difficulty is that the principles established by the editors are frequently not adopted and the list of authors does not reflect who has actually developed the work, so honesty and ethics in the dissemination of science should be a priority extended to authorship. It is often better to prevent a problem than to solve it, which is why COPE recommends the following three principles [4]:

a) Fostering ethical authorship. One problem is that unethical authors simply follow local habits and practices. It is important that they know the opinion of the editors so that, over time, the culture changes. It is important to have available at least one book on publication ethics. Also ask your institution if there is a university policy on authorship, publication, and copyright, and start working on one if there is not.

b) Talking about authorship when planning the research. Raise the topic from the beginning. Begin to gather opinions from all the members of the work team and, if possible, the authorship in a face-to-face meeting. Even before the study, it must be considered all the publications that might come out of it, such as a conference review, a full article, and who is likely to be most involved in them, and keep a record of the decisions you make.

c) Deciding the authorship before starting each article. Many authorship difficulties arise from expectations and poor communication. That is why it is important that, before starting to write a project, the roles must be decided. An ideal scenery would be to do it face to face, although it is not always possible.

Additionally, disagreements about authorship can be categorized into two types: those that do not contravene the guidelines (disputes) and those that do so(misconduct).

Disputes: It is a matter of interpretation, that is, whether someone's contribution has been substantial or not. In such cases, you must negotiate with the people involved. If you try to include or omit a name from the list of authors, you must unemotionally demonstrate why you do not agree with the decision, supporting with evidence such as laboratory notebooks, manuscripts, and instructions for authors.

Misconduct: If you learn that someone intends to do something with the list of authors that is unethical, then there is a real problem. In this case, it is recommended to explain that the proposed list of authors contravenes the editors' recommendations and could be considered a lack of scientific ethics. Again, stick to the facts and avoid emotions. Point out that an editor might decline publication if they find out about the situation.

Some key concepts to keep in mind when authoring

Acknowledgments: Most journals allow (or even encourage) this acknowledgment, in which all other non-authors who have contributed to the work should go and should be mentioned in the acknowledgments, and what they did should be described. Everyone on this list should be aware of this.

Contributorship: It is recommended that authors indicate their contribution to the project, authors must provide a description, and publishers must publish that information.

Corresponding Author: The researcher who receives evaluations, proofs, and whose contact details are published to get in touch with the research group. Journal editors consider it a purely administrative function, but some authors equate it with seniority. Consider the opinion of your co-authors from the beginning and decide in advance who will be the corresponding author. Ideally, choose someone whose contact details will not change in the near future.

First and last author: The first author is considered the most valued position, which is not surprising because of the convention of referring to studies e.g., Williams et al. have shown it. Therefore, the first author is generally considered to make the most significant contribution to the research. It is sometimes considered important to be the last author. However, opinions on the matter seem to vary, so not everyone thinks the same. Often the authors have given the last post to a member who has provided expertise and guidance.

Ghost Authors: The term can be used to describe people who have made a significant contribution to a research project but are not listed as authors. This practice is condemned and it should be noted that "All persons designated as authors must meet the requirements for authorship, and all those who meet the requirements must be listed."

Gift authors: People listed as authors but who have not contributed significantly to the research. These are often high-level personalities whose names are added to obtain a favor. Another type of author gift is a colleague whose name is added with the understanding that it will do the same for whoever includes it, regardless of authorship criteria.

Guarantor: It is recognized that it may be unreasonable to ask individuals to take responsibility for all aspects of the research. However, the editors believe that it is important that one person ensures the integrity of the entire project. In this sense, the guarantor accepts full responsibility for the work, having access to all the data, and the decision to publish.

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