

## **Ethics of Authorship in Publications**

Katrina A. Korb

Department of Educational Foundations

University of Jos

Korb, K. A. (2015). Ethics of authorship in publications [Editorial]. *Journal of Educational Foundations*, 5, 1-4.

If a student submits an assignment that they did not write, every lecturer would agree that student engaged in an academic malpractice. In addition to violating the character value of honesty, students do not learn or develop their skills when they engage in this type of malpractice. Thus, both to help strengthen students' understanding of the course content and to ensure that students develop the character value of honesty, it is vital that students have personally completed the assignment that they have submitted with their name on it.

It is therefore surprising that an equivalent malpractice has been on the rise amongst academics. Once a paper has been accepted for publication in a journal or book, an additional name is added to the paper as an author. The added author generally has contributed nothing to the paper beyond perhaps paying for the publication fee. This is the exact same malpractice as a student who copies their assignment from their mate but submits it as his or her own. In both malpractices, a person's name is on an assignment or paper that they did not contribute to. That person is receiving credit for knowledge that they have no part of. Amongst academics, the practice of adding authors who have not made substantial contributions to the paper is a violation international standards for authorship.

### **Guidelines for Authorship**

The American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) defines authorship as follows:

**Definition of authorship.** Individuals should only take authorship credit for work they have actually performed or to which they have substantially contributed (APA Ethics Code Standard 8.12a, Publication Credit). Authorship encompasses, therefore, not only those who do the actual writing but also those who have made substantial scientific contributions to a study. Substantial professional contributions may include formulating the problem or hypothesis, structuring the experimental design, organizing and conducting the statistical analysis, interpreting the results, or writing a major portion of the paper. Those who so contribute are listed in the byline. Lesser contributions, which do not constitute authorship, may be acknowledged in a note. These contributions may include such supportive functions as designing or building the apparatus, suggesting or advising about the statistical analysis, collecting or entering the data, modifying or structuring a computer program, and recruiting participants or obtaining animals. Conducting routine observations or diagnoses for use in a study does not constitute authorship. Combinations of these (and other) tasks, however, may justify authorship (APA, 2010, p. 18).

In summary, a person can be considered an author of a paper if that person has contributed "in an intellectually significant way to the paper" (Strange, 2008, para. 3). From the APA definition given above, a significant intellectual contribution can include any of the following:

- Formulating the research problem and/or hypotheses.

- Developing the research methods for the study.
- Organizing and conducting the statistical analyses.
- Interpreting the results.
- Writing a major portion of the paper.

According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2014), activities that alone do *not* qualify for authorship are “*acquisition of funding*; general supervision of a research group or general administrative support; and writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading” (emphasis added, p. 3). Again, Strange (2008) says, “*Providing funding, reagents, or advice deserves acknowledgement, not authorship*” (emphasis added, How to Minimize and Prevent Authorship Abuse, para 2). Therefore, it is unethical to add an author to the paper simply because he or she provided funding for the research and/or the publication fee.

It is almost impossible for a person to make a significant intellectual contribution to a paper after it has been accepted. After a paper has been accepted for publication, it typically only needs fine-tuning. Therefore, a person who helps revise a paper that has already been accepted does not qualify for authorship as noted above. Individuals who have provided assistance with the paper should be acknowledged and appreciated in a footnote, not added as an author.

### **Authorship Requires Accountability for the Paper**

Virtually all guidelines for authorship include the criteria that all authors give “final approval of the version to be published and [agree] to be accountable for all aspects of the work” (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2014, p. 2). Academics should keep this point in mind for all papers that they agree to co-author. If one's name is listed as an author on a paper, then it means that person has given approval to every aspect of the article, and he or she will subsequently be held accountable for everything written in that paper. This means that if plagiarism or misconduct (such as fabricated data) is discovered in the paper, then that person will be held responsible, even if he or she were not the person who plagiarized that portion of the paper. Therefore, academics must be very cautious about who they collaborate with to ensure that they are not punished for the wrongdoing of a co-author.

Strange (2008) described one example of the danger of fraudulent authorship, called the “Darsee affair.” Dr. John Darsee was a cardiologist and researcher at Harvard Medical School and Emory University School of Medicine in the United States. In two years, Dr. Darsee authored or coauthored over 100 papers. However, it was discovered that almost all of these publications were based on fabricated data, meaning that he made up the data either in part or whole. Dr. Darsee co-authored many of these fraudulent papers with other researchers. However, the co-authors were “gift authors,” which meant they did not make any contribution to the papers, but were given authorship as a gift based on their status or relationship with Dr. Darsee. When the fraudulent data was discovered, these “gift authors” were immediately incriminated as well. While the “gift authors” did not participate in the more serious crime of fabricating data as Dr. Darsee did, they still had to take responsibility for the crime of fraudulent authorship.

The same result can happen to individuals who agree to be a co-author on a paper for which they did not contribute. For example, lecturers oftentimes agree to be a co-author with students or junior academic staff, sometimes without even reading the paper. However, if that paper has any problems whatsoever, that person will be held accountable even if they did not participate in the malpractice. To avoid this embarrassment, academics should be selective in who they agree to co-author papers with and ensure that they have made a significant intellectual

contribution to each paper. Also discuss the ethics of plagiarism and other malpractices before starting the process of co-authoring a paper, particularly with young scholars.

### **Effects of Fraudulent Authorship**

Fraudulent authorship, regardless of whether it is a “gift” to a senior academic, a practical strategy for paying the publication fee, an acknowledgment of someone who provided a small degree of help in the paper, or simply assistance for a well-respected colleague, is unethical. Most simply, this violates the character value of honesty. As described above, authorship means that a person has made a significant *intellectual* contribution to the paper. Adding a person as an author who has not made an intellectual contribution is lying, plain and simple.

Furthermore, fraudulent authorship also misrepresents that person’s contribution to the worldwide body of knowledge. “Authorship is also the primary mechanism for determining the allocation of credit for scientific advances and thus the primary basis for assessing a scientist's contributions to developing new knowledge” (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, & Institute of Medicine, 1993, Authorship, para. 2). In an academic environment, promotion is largely based on the number of publications because publications represent the degree to which someone has contributed to the body of knowledge. Thus, if a person buys their way into authorship in a publication, that means they are implicitly buying their way into a promotion. Fraudulent authorship practices mean that a person may appear to have made a great contribution to knowledge when, in fact, they may not have the skills, knowledge, or creativity to make any contribution to knowledge. However, they can still rise through the ranks of promotion by getting their name added as an author through the goodwill of colleagues, provision of minor editorial assistance, or payment of publication fees.

Fraudulent authorship also undermines and devalues the hard work and intelligence of those who actually put their understanding, skills, creativity, time, and energy to write papers that make meaningful contributions to scholarship. If one person can have an equal number of publications simply by paying publication fees or reviewing a paper for grammatical errors, then why should others put their knowledge, time, and energy into the very hard work that it takes to truly author an academic paper?

Thus, adding an author’s name to a paper after it has been accepted for publication and/or because the person paid the publication fee is impersonation, just as a student who pays another person to complete their assignment or examination for them. Being listed as an author of a paper that you have not written both violates the character value of honesty and undermines the knowledge and skills necessary to write an academic paper and thus be promoted in an academic context.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the authors of a paper should only include those who have made a significant intellectual contribution to the paper. Furthermore, academics must also be careful to avoid accepting “gift authorships,” both to correctly represent the intellectual contribution each person has made and to avoid the embarrassment of being held responsible for wrong-doing by the person who actually wrote the paper. By so doing, those who have made a significant contribution to the worldwide body of knowledge will be duly and correctly identified, and lecturers will be setting a good example to students and society for how to perform one’s duties with integrity and honesty.

As academics, we are role models for our students, who look to us for how they should behave in the university. We cannot expect our students to be honest in their assignments and examinations if we are engaged in the same malpractices at a higher level. As intellectuals, we are the trendsetters in society. Because of our knowledge and wisdom, others look to us for how they should behave in society. We cannot expect citizens to be honest in their daily interactions if we are not honest in ours. "To whom much is given, much is expected." As scholars, we have been given much, both in our knowledge and the high status placed on our positions. We are expected to use what we have been given to be good examples to others in our use and application of knowledge. This means that we must be filled with honesty and integrity in every responsibility we have been given, which includes the authorship of papers.

### References

- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (2014). *Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals*. Retrieved from <http://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf>
- National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, & Institute of Medicine. (1993). *Responsible science: Ensuring the integrity of the research process (vol. II)*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK236202/>
- Strange, K. (2008). Authorship: Why not just toss a coin? *American Journal of Physiology Cell Physiology*, 295, C567-C575. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18776156>