

Questionable authorship and the problem of dirty hands: throwing missing authorship into the ring. In response to both Bulow and Helgesson, and Tang

Research Ethics

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Abstract

The unethical practice of gift authorship and hostage authorship was portrayed in detail in previous issues of *Research Ethics*. The aim of this short article is to explore the impact of penalising junior researchers for partaking in gift authorship, and the occurrence and implications of missing authorship in publication. It concludes with reflections on current guidelines and suggestions put forth by Bulow and Helgesson, and Tang, and potential strategies for counteracting the frequency with which both occur.

Keywords

Gift authorship, hostage authorship, missing authorship, coercion, dirty hands

Bulow and Helgesson (2018, 2019) and Tang (2018) discuss the practice of gift authorship and its implications for both the immediate research team and the greater research community. Bulow and Helgesson (2018) present eight scenarios which can be broken down into three categories according to whether gifted authorship is

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motivated by self-servitude, selflessness, or coercion, or a combination of all three. The first of these is highlighted by examples where an individual 'X' is gifted authorship on the basis that their presence on an article is likely to increase its chances of success (i.e. being accepted for publication or becoming more visible) or that the inclusion of 'X' as an author forms part of a past or future pattern or expectation of reciprocity. The second of these, motivated by selflessness, refers to the practice of gifting authorship as a token of gratitude or admiration or as a way of helping or supporting the career of individual 'X'. The final of these, where authorship is gifted as a result of perceived or actual coercion, is exemplified by instances where 'X', typically a more powerful and senior researcher, is included in publications due to the junior researchers' fears regarding the potentially negative consequences of excluding them. These scenarios lead the authors to conclude that although these events are likely realistic, such authorship should not be granted, but rather battled against by junior researchers and punished by the research community.

In their article, Bulow and Helgesson (2018) state that 'junior researchers may very well find themselves in hostage-like scenarios in relation to their supervisors, where it is their career that is on the line. Even though it is an awful situation, it is doubtful whether it is justifiable to save one's career in situations like these by accepting the hostage-taker's conditions' (p. 7). Whilst in agreement that such behaviour should be fought and punished by the research community, it is imperative that it does not unjustly penalise those who are most vulnerable. In some circumstances, gift authorship could be a symptom of a much larger systemic failure within academia, particularly felt by women in science or technology-related disciplines: workplace bullying (Devlin and Marsh, 2018; Ranieri et al., 2018). Furthermore, the 'need' to gift authorship to those who may be undeserving could also be viewed as evidence of the pressure that junior researchers experience in an academic career which currently, for most, offers neither a permanent nor a stable source of employment in the UK (Chakraborty and Weale, 2016). Penalising this group, who are typically in a precarious state of employment, places the blame and burden on junior researchers, who are less well-resourced and more invisible within the research community than their seniors. Though these may, in part, play a role in perpetuating the practice, they are not the creators of it. For change to occur, the unethicity of the practice must also be primarily understood and upheld by senior researchers. Agreeing with Bulow and Helgesson (2019), however, waiting for senior researchers to be punished for their actions would likely stall research and detrimentally increase the already significant lag between discovery and enactment into policy (Morris et al., 2011).

Missing authorship

As an equally worrying addendum to the practice of gift authorship, the problem of missing authorship in research outputs also raises serious ethical concerns. In

this author's experience, junior researchers who have contributed substantially to the successful completion of studies are not always included as authors on publications. At present, there is no impetus or obligation on senior researchers to acknowledge the contribution of junior researchers if guidelines do not protect them or are enforceable. Under current *International Committee of Medical Journal Editors* guidelines, authorship is granted to those who contribute substantially 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. (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2019)

Whilst junior researchers may or may not be involved in the conception or design of a research study, they are often the ones to conduct the research, and acquire and analyse the data. However, under these guidelines, if they are not offered the opportunity to contribute to a manuscript, they have no claim to authorship. This practice assumes that those with overall responsibility for a study will make decisions regarding authorship that are ethically sound, leave junior researchers powerless and with no springboard where they can dispute authorship and open the way to preferential inclusion of senior researchers by means of gift authorship. Thus, this author would argue, there is a need for the research community to re-examine the criteria for authorship.

A solution?

Resolving the problem of both missing and gifted authorship requires that more than one party take responsibility for ensuring its prevention. Including a 'who did what' statement may not be enough as those who are coerced into gifting authorship are also likely coerced into acknowledging the 'input' of those who are gifted it. Such authorship may be a result of a generational cycle of abuse within the workplace which requires effective interruption and subsequent prevention. Whilst resources such as the Committee on Publication Ethics can play a part in disputes regarding authorship, resolutions and appeals too can be prolonged (Committee on

Publication Ethics (COPE), 2019). Gift authorship may be investigated following anonymous feedback regarding author misconduct; however, where there are small teams, the extent to which a ‘tip-off’ remains anonymous can be questionable. Nevertheless, one possible solution to the predicament of missing authorship may be to construct a free and open-access central database where all institutions are mandated in registering all ongoing research. Enclosed within this registration must be a list of researchers allocated to each study, their specific tasks and the time period in which they are involved in the study. Upon submission of a manuscript to a journal, the journal must check for discrepancies between the named authors on a publication and those registered on the database. Should the journal find discrepancies, both the principal investigator and those whose names are missing from the publication must be contacted for clarification. I invite Bulow, Helgesson, Tang and all other interested parties to help me in setting such a database up.

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