

## **Respectfully Yours...: Dealing With Questionable Authorship Practices**

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Dear delighted scholars

### **RE: RESPONSIBLE AUTHORSHIP PRACTICES**

Taking into full account the existence of field- or discipline-specific guidelines and practices, I write this commentary exclusively based on responsible authorship practices, going beyond the domain of educational and social research. I argue that there should be common ethical standards, beyond the disciplinary practices, regarding what qualifies an individual to be named an author on a paper and what does not. Ethical bodies dealing with publication ethics, such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Council of Science Editors, or International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, among others, offer valuable guidance on authorship, and most journal publishers have adopted their recommendations. Consequently, it should be evident who deserves credit as an author. However, the reality is often marked by confusion, apprehension, and inadequate communication (Tress Academic, 2021) in co-authorship. Unethical co-authorship, especially ghost and gift, coincides with other ethical transgressions in academic writing and publishing.

The co-authorship of supervisors on papers authored by their PhD students is a contentious issue in academia. While the answer to this question may appear straightforward due to established rules governing authorship, this issue is often fraught with complexities (Teixeira da Silva, 2021; Thomson, 2013). Some supervisors, colloquially referred to as the “Byline Bandit” “steal credit from’ or ‘ride on the coat

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tails of’ their PhD students” (Patrick-Thomson, 2015, para. 7). Despite increased awareness of authorship integrity, publication ethics, and responsible research practice (Baykaldi & Miller, 2021; Dhakal, 2016) among academics, this phenomenon in question is increasing – or at least has come to the public gaze in recent years. Research by Pruschak and Hopp (2022) indicates that authorship misconduct occurs due to researchers’ misconceptions about authorship criteria; however, I feel that it is not just a ‘theoretical misconception’ but an intentional one. Also, because in cases where scientific misconduct is spotted after publication, the so-called senior researchers do not seem to share accountability for the misconduct – since this issue has not been legally dealt with in many South Asian countries, a verbal response that “they were not aware” and that it was done by the junior researcher would normally suffice. It is sad to share my observation that such malpractice is high among those who, in different fora, are more vocal about research ethics and talking about enhancing research culture in their institutions, especially in higher education. Contrarily, those who have fewer publications and smaller networks are somehow ‘not taking research outputs’ (number) seriously or it could be that they are “not capable enough for research publication”. For me, the latter is better than the first category of pundits who focus on numbers but pay no heed to basic scholarly norms.

At an individual level, some supervisors claim co-authorship of every publication written during the candidature (Brabazon, 2013). I have also closely witnessed supervisors who have exclusively published with their students, largely overshadowing the students’ contributions. More so, even these students themselves are also ‘established’ faculty (sometimes within the same university and program as their supervisor), but they cannot say ‘no’. They might think that this is right, assumed, proper or the default setting (Brabazon, 2013). This byline banditry is further fostered by some ‘disciplinary practices’ or ‘institutional guidelines’ that PhD students must publish with their supervisors – some even demand supervisor’s name to be listed first, some alphabetically – irrespective of any ‘meaningful’ contribution (e.g., as per Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) or COPE authorship guidelines) – that can reasonably be attributed to the so-called supervisor – to the paper itself. This phenomenon is comparable to ‘policy corruption’ in public institution governance.

Recently, I had an opportunity to edit a co-authored paper, where the names of the supervisor and a research tycoon in the field’ followed the ‘junior’ researcher (a PhD

student), which included the work largely – almost solely – by the PhD student. When I was reading the paper, I sensed right from the beginning that the ‘first’ author was the one who conducted research and wrote the paper and ‘intentionally’ inserted other two (honorary and guest) co-authors to please them. While doing so, the first author (or the authors) tried to give a background on the original contribution of the ‘first’ author in the data collection and preliminary analysis and other two authors as revising and making a substantial contribution to the analysis. The author contribution statement was good enough. However, there was no single instance where ‘we’ was ‘naturally’ occurring in the paper. While going through it more seriously, I found that even the analysis section largely presents ‘single’ authored flavor. The ‘substantial contribution’ by the two byline bandits could have at least ensured that the paper reads like a joint effort. More surprisingly, the paper had passed through the high standard ‘double-blind’ peer review process in a so-called ‘prestigious’ publisher work in a so-called Q1 journal; the editorial team comprised so-called ‘founding fathers/mothers’ of the thematic area – with whom the ‘research tycoon’ had worked in several publications. More so, when one observantly reads the paper, they would find that the works cited were based on courtesy (since they are citing my paper, I should too), citation bias (Gøtzsche, 2022) and citation cartel or citation mafia (Enago Academy, 2022) – sidelining other works prevalent in the field, they go for citing each others’ work (where the cited works have little relevance) – even in some cases the attribution were false (cited ideas which have not been found in original work). This raises spikey questions on the morality of citation – is credit given to the right contributors? In fact, citation cartel surpasses the disciplinary boundary – it is pervasive (Fister et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2019). This group mistakes count of citation as the sole indicator of research impact. This topic needs another commentary.

To check my own perspectives on ‘authorship,’ I thought of seeking other colleagues’ ideas on the same paper. I deleted the names of the authors and asked two other colleagues (one local and another international – the latter also contributes to the discussion of research/publication ethics on Editage Insights [<https://www.editage.com/insights/>]) to read the paper and reflect on the authorship; both of their responses were in lines of: ‘the first paragraph on author contribution is the later add on and the last two co-authors are not authors’ – just supervisor/reviewer of the first author’s PhD research, not the paper itself. Here, it is the responsibility of the

PhD student to talk straight and discuss the authorship issue with their supervisor. More importantly, to call oneself a PhD scholar, one must have the guts to critically engage in the scholarly debate, including fair authorship roles. A clear suggestion is to follow Brabazon's (2013) rule and advice, "If I write it, it is mine. If you write it, it is yours. If we write it together, we share the authorship" (Brabazon, 2013, para. 12). Gastel and Day (2022) also blatantly state: "It [the list of authorship] should not include those without considerable contributions—whether to please them, help advance their careers, or try to impress editors, referees, or readers" (p. 51). Aligning with these strong propositions, I encourage PhD students to ensure fair distribution of authorship based on contribution – not based on seniority in position or with an intention to please your supervisor(s). Since authorship order has significant implications for accountability and credit assignment, it is time for authors in those disciplines where alphabetical order of contributors is the 'practice'. Maybe, the case of 'equal first authors' can retain the alphabetical order, but this should be clearly spelled out in the author contribution statement.

Another case happened in one of the papers covered in this issue of the journal, where initially and up to the time of submitting the revised paper based on reviewers' reports, there was/were one or a few authors, and after the subsequent review of whether all comments were adequately addressed, the author(s) reverted the revised version with another author appending at the end. When the authors were asked to submit an author contribution statement, the first author(s) realized that the new author was not an author but a 'gift author', and they deleted the name again (and an explanation with an apology was provided in a separate author contribution statement).

The resultant scenario might have been well-intentioned and a way of mentoring young researchers. But it could be defined and practised in some other way. Whatever might be the intention, slowly, the practice of senior researcher names appearing in the novice researcher's paper – without the veteran's meaningful contribution is eroding trust in them. It is indeed a good idea for supervisors to "take up co-writing as part of their supervision practice" (Thomson, 2013, para. 2), but they should be ready to contribute (co-write, rather than just supervise) to the extent they feel that they have moral rights to claim co-authorship. To restore trust, in published works directly proceeding from doctoral candidates' research, their names be placed first, irrespective of the discipline and institutional 'local norms', followed by the names of their

supervisors if they have also worked on the paper (de Lautour, 2018). However, as an “Extension of the Doctoral Relationship” (de Lautour, 2018), publishing papers in areas that interest both the candidate and the supervisor is fine. Obviously, the order of names should follow the extent of contribution. Hereby, I re-state my position that co-authorship represents a ‘vibrant academic culture’ (Scott, 2022) and thus its sanctity needs to be preserved by embracing established ethical guidelines for co-authorship scholarship.

I express my sincere gratitude for your engagement with this commentary and extend an invitation to enrich our discourse further. I invite scholars interested in this issue to add more heads in exploring and exposing nuanced examples of such practices – both institutional and individual. Furthermore, I encourage young scholars to ‘renounce the false modesty of their predecessors’ (Gastel & Day, 2022, p. 211) and ask themselves a critical question whether ‘somebody’ qualifies to be a co-author of your paper before you (agree to) name them as co-author(s).

Respectfully yours

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