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Publication ethics on paper and in reality

What does it take to be a co-author in a scientific publication? There are international standards, for instance American Chemical Society ethical guidelines: <http://pubs.acs.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1218054468605/ethics.pdf>.

Point B 11 in this document reads “The co-authors of a paper should be all those persons who have made significant scientific contributions to the work reported and who share responsibility and accountability for the results.” Furthermore, it says, “An administrative relationship to the investigation does not of itself qualify a person for co-authorship...”

In the Swedish Research Council’s “Good Research Practice” from 2011, it similarly says: “An increasing number of influential journals in more and more research areas are adopting these rules which, among other things, state: “Authorship credit should be based on 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3.”

So how can these guidelines be interpreted? For most people it is quite clear, given that it is possible to define what a significant scientific contribution is. To my point of view, it cannot be a scientific contribution to pay somebody’s salary. Also, it cannot be to allow someone to use his/her equipment. Furthermore, it should not be to only read a manuscript when it is ready to be submitted. In collaborative work, where one of the contributing persons is a PhD student, his/her supervisor cannot be guaranteed an authorship unless he or she did contribute significantly to the work.

All of these extra non-contributing co-authors will “dilute” the contribution from the researchers who actually did a significant amount of work. It also prevents younger researchers to become more independent in their research if they by default need to include more senior co-authors in their publications. Worst of all, it is a kind of cheating, since these researchers get longer publication lists than they should. In a way, it is as bad as buying a CV on the Internet or even as bad as fabricating data.

So why is this happening at all? There is a strong collegiality among researchers, which is both good and bad. This collegiality in some cases leads to senior researchers making each other favors, helping each other to boost h-indexes and publication lists. As mentioned above, that is cheating. Another less honorable reason is that some senior researchers have the attitude of “owning” the younger researchers in his/her group, meaning that all publications coming out from that group should carry the group leader’s name. This is also a way of controlling the younger researchers. I would say, not allowing younger researchers to publish their independent research independently is a type of dictatorial manner that should be fought.

There could of course be more honorable reasons to include certain co-authors, although they did not much to contribute. One such reason could be that a co-publication is beneficial for a research grant application. Another reason could be that one part of the research

results was removed towards the end, which then led to that one of the co-author had not contributed to the work in the submitted version. I argue that it is still possible to do something actively by enabling researchers to be included. This could be to invite such co-authors at an early stage of the project, to allow them to contribute significantly. However, this requires a large portion of communications, and communication in general is the largest challenge within academia.

Finally, I will summarize the discussions above in a NABC business model:

Needs – Young researchers need to prove their independency in order to obtain prestigious research funding and get promoted in their career path

Approach – To publish high-quality research articles without the senior researcher at the department (typically a professor in the same research field)

Benefits – A successful young researcher will bring in more research funding to the department as well as realizing new innovative ideas, which is a win-win situation for this researcher vs. the more senior researcher at the department

Competition – Senior researchers (often professors) who strive for high h-index and long publication lists, instead of acknowledging/allowing the younger researchers to get their well-deserved credit

I round up this blog with a few words to funding agencies: Some of the responsibility should be on the funding agencies that ask for h-indexes and impressive publication lists in grant applications. For established researchers, perhaps there are alternative ways to measure scientific excellence, for instance a publication list from the department/research group not necessarily having the established researcher's name on all those publications. This is certainly of importance in larger calls for funding, for instance "centers of excellence" and other large prestigious grants.

For sure, publication ethics in reality is something far more complicated than on the paper.