

Authorship, contributorship, who's doing what, and what do we need?

Background

Authorship issues are one of the most common issues that COPE members have to deal with. Leaving aside the ethically problematic issues of ghost, guest and gift authorship, seemingly simpler authorship disputes of for example, who deserves authorship, or what author order should be are very common across most disciplines.

There a number of authorship guidelines, including those from the [ICMJE](#), but even journals that use these guidelines encounter problems with understanding of the issues and compliance from authors. COPE has [flowcharts](#), which can at least help with handling issues once they arise.

However, it is now not clear whether authorship guidelines reflect current research practices, let alone future needs, and there is increasing discussion whether contributorship or some other method should be used instead.

Questions for discussion

- How frequently do you see authorship disputes at your journal—and if so, of what type?
- Does your discipline have specific authorship guidelines?
- Have you considered using contributorship criteria instead?
- Could COPE usefully provide further guidance in this area?

The topic was discussed at the COPE Forum on 3 June 2013.

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (3 June 2013) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- The most common authorship issues appear to be an author is left off a paper, or a paper is published without an author's name on it. Editors tend to ask the institution to investigate in such instances.
- The issue of authorship has changed as a consequence of large studies conducted by consortiums. Some papers can have 100+ authors—in such cases, there are technical problem related to how you fit all the names on the paper. With so many authors, is authorship a meaningful term? Should there be categories of authorship?
- Should journals use contributorship more? In addition to being an author, the journal lists the contribution of each author. For most journals, however, only authorship is used.
- Authorship issues differ by discipline. In the social sciences, there are generally very few authors, and these are generally listed alphabetically. If listed alphabetically, equal contributorship is presumed for all of the authors.
- Comments from the website indicated that the most prevalent authorship issues are multiple authorship, honorary authorship, problems with graduate students, and author

order. Physics papers, for example, may have hundreds or even thousands of authors listed who probably have never seen the paper.

- Most biomedical journals seem to follow the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE http://www.icmje.org/urm_main.html) guidelines for authorship. Not all authors are aware of these guidelines.
- Should COPE provide guidance on who should be considered an author, and a definition of who should be an author and who should be a contributor?
- There is an ongoing discussion on the idea of getting rid of authorship completely, and only listing contributors.
- It is more important to be clear about who is taking responsibility for part of all of the work that is written in the paper, irrespective of whether you call them an author or contributor.
- There are discipline specific issues, and issues around PhD students and their supervisors.
- Is there a role for COPE in pulling together all the author guidelines across disciplines? Should COPE promote good authorship practice?
- COPE should certainly encourage journals to publish their author guidelines prominently in the journal and on their website.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by t, 29/5/2013 2.32pm

Good topic that I don't think any journal (including the ICMJE) has solved. Multiple authorship is rampant with the number of authors sometimes taking up an entire page (exactly how much could each have actually contributed?) I see secondary analyses of multicenter NIH funded studies where the original authors have set up their own rules. Their names must be listed as authors on each new paper even though all they "contribute" is to read through the manuscript. Much of this is simply "CV padding", it seems to me to be an ethical problem worth addressing.

Posted by David J.W. Piper, 29/5/2013 2.42pm

I am an Editor of the journal "Marine Geology". We see a lot of papers (~30 %) in which there is a strong suspicion of honorary authorship. This most commonly occurs with papers in which a graduate student is first author and is trying to meet university requirements of a certain number of published papers for the award of an M.Sc. or Ph.D. Then the particular problem is that the co-authors use the excuse that because the paper should principally reflect the work of the student, they do not make significant intellectual contribution to the content and more obviously do not play a sufficient role in drafting and revising the paper. I appreciate that this problem is peripheral to the main focus of your discussion, but it is a problem that has grown greatly in the past 5 years as more and more universities have formal

or informal requirements about published paper for graduate degrees. Specific COPE guidelines that editors could quote back to authors with regard to the balance between a graduate degree being the intellectual property of a student whereas resulting papers needing to meet normal authorship guidelines would be very useful.

Posted by Hazel Jones, 29/5/2013 3.48pm

I find that authorship contributions for Review articles with multiple authors are quite difficult. Often you get 'All authors contributed equally' when you know this cannot be the case. They probably contributed different sections. BMC has guidelines but corresponding authors may not adhere and are reluctant to be more specific about the co-author roles. The same problem does not arise with Research articles.

Posted by Vivian Siegel, 29/5/2013 7.37pm

I would like to see a discussion around large collaborations and what constitutes authorship in those cases. We are working on criteria inside our own institute, but don't want to "penalize" our scientists in comparison to other institutes (which may have less strict criteria for authorship). I always find "significant" a large gray area - what is significant to one researcher may be insignificant to another.

Another issue is authorship order, which varies from discipline to discipline. But in areas where the first author is considered the most significant contributor, this can destroy a collaboration. In many ways, we'd be better with alphabetical order and contributorship lists. One thing I would like to see is a change in which journals list and cite co-first authors (however many there are). So, if A and B are both first authors, they should always both be named in a list of authors, as in A, B, et al. (instead of A et al.), both be bolded in the list, and so on. I'd be interested in knowing what other editors think about allowing author B to list the paper as B, A, et al. also. Or for the journal to provide both as official citations.

Posted by Laura, 30/5/2013 2.33pm

Unfortunately I will be unable to attend the meeting in person, however I thought it might be useful to share my thoughts from a journal publisher whose focus lies outside of STEM:

- 1) We rarely see authorship disputes of a serious nature (i.e. ghost/gift authorship), however, one issue is authors including people who should be acknowledged rather than authors, and the biggest issue is arguments about the order of authors post-publication.
- 2) Our disciplines do not have specific authorship guidelines akin to anything like CERN, however, we do state in our author guidelines that the order of authors/authorship should be agreed prior to submission to any of the journals. We have also requested that authors warrant on the copyright form that all people who should be considered authors have had sight of the final manuscript and agree to the author order.
- 3) We haven't considered this previously, however as authors continue to work in larger groups globally, it might be beneficial for us to have some guidelines (though I am not sure as to whether this would fall into COPE's remit or not).
- 4) What we would be most grateful for is if COPE could provide some benchmarks as to who should be considered an author/the definition of an author vs. who should be considered a contributor, that we could point our Editors and authors to.

I hope that this has offered some food for thought.

Laura Jenkins

(Emerald Group Publishing)

Posted by Siri Lunde Strømme, 31/5/2013 10.36pm

I am an associate editor in The Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association. I would like to share some thoughts from our journal.

First of all we appreciate COPE's initiative to address the authorship issue, which has important implications for the academic environment in terms of research financing and individual careers. We believe that COPE has a role in keeping discussions about authorship and authorship criteria alive, and to contribute to develop and refine the existing criteria.

Our journal follows the ICMJE-criteria for authorship, and we ask authors of scientific papers to provide information of their contributions (1). In our experience, authors rarely involve editors in authorship disputes. However, editorial responsibility in authorship issues is frequently discussed in our editorial meetings. Our policy has been for the editor to have a passive role. We inform authors of our authorship criteria in the instructions for authors and in the submission process, and apply the COPE flowcharts when there are any changes in authorship. But should our responsibility go further? One example is articles with an extensive list of authors, where it seems obvious that not all persons listed qualify for authorship. Should the editor interfere? It may seem like a paradox to have strict authorship criteria, and at the same time not being active in observing that the rules are obeyed. Where goes the line between author and editorial responsibility? We would appreciate if COPE could address this question and provide some guidance.

1. Hem E. What is an author? Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2012; 132:381.
http://tidsskriftet.no/article/2221519/en_GB (31.5. 2013).

Posted by Alex Anstey, 2/6/2013 8.59pm

Good topic. I will submit a recent case that we have experienced in our journal related to this issue.