

Authorships, Collaborations, and Acknowledgments: On the Increasing Responsibility to Report Relative Contributions

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The number of authors per article continues to increase in research relating to adolescent development. Indeed, single authorship is becoming a rarity. In this journal, for example and over the past few years, only about 5–6 % of manuscripts have been single-authored; while, in 2000, over 30 % were single-authored. The average number of authors per article also continues to increase, from about 2 in early 2000 to about 3.5 in 2011. Put another way, the proportion of articles published by four or more authors constituted about 15 % of articles in 2000 and well over 50 % in 2010. Given that we publish from 100 to 125 articles per year, the trend appears to be a robust one not attributable to such factors as temporary fluctuations in submissions or journal special issues. The trend certainly appears here to stay and likely will become the standard.

Several fields of study have reported similar trends in the increasing number of authors per manuscript and have sought to explain it. Commentators attribute documented author inflation to several sources. Among the apparent driving forces are the increasing pressure to publish, specialization of research expertise, collaborative efforts, larger research teams, financial incentives (e.g., citation-based evaluation metrics relating to promotion and grant activity), concern for prestige, and even gift and bullied authorships. If anything, these pressures appear likely to increase, which supports the notion that the trend in author inflation likely will continue unabated or at least not reverse itself.

The trend is worthy of notice. Authoring serves as the final affirmation of scholarly accomplishment and the foundation of a field's development. Changes in authoring

may raise challenges and, apparently, they do. Perhaps because they noticed the spike in author inflation before ours did, other fields have identified concerns and responded to the issues they raise. Perhaps the greatest concern has been outright fraud that emerges from the pressures to publish, as well as the challenges that arise in attributing proper authorship and taking responsibility for it. The importance of authorship and the potential challenges raised by multiple authorships have led to proposals to have authors report their contributions.

We can learn from other fields. At first, other fields experimented with encouraging, but not requiring, the identification of authors' specific contributions. That experimentation ended with a clear message: unless editors insist, authors will resist (as concluded, for example, by the editors of JAMA, see Rennie et al. 2002). This is a bit odd given that authors often have acknowledgment sections detailing the assistance of those who are not authors. Yet, for the articles themselves, it is assumed both that the order of authorship reveals the contribution and that being listed itself means that the author appropriately contributed and takes full responsibility for the article's content. But those assumptions surprisingly do not meet reality in more cases than one would like, especially when dealing with an increasing number of authors per manuscript (e.g., see Rennie et al. 2002).

As other disciplines have learned, the best practice in responding to limitations of traditionally ascribing authorship is to have the authors affirmatively report their contributions and to have that affirmation published for readers. This is not a cure-all, as some authors still may bully their way to authorship or what is reported may not fully reveal the full contribution. These limitations in reporting are not surprising, as social scientists know full well that what is articulated and reported does not always

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reflect lived experiences and that different readers have different interpretations of reports. In response to these realities, editors and professional societies increasingly view requiring reports of contributions as a necessary first step in the right direction.

Journals that focus on adolescent development have not kept pace with editorial developments. Although they do draw from a variety of disciplines and champion multi-disciplinary work and inter-disciplinarity (something increasingly demanded by funding agencies), journals like ours have yet to adopt the practices of many of the disciplines that contribute to it and have yet to seek transparency by providing readers with a clearer sense of who contributed what. We see no reason for that, as there are no legitimate reasons to claim exception. As a result, this journal has adopted other disciplines' practice of publishing author contribution statements. We trust, as other journals that have adopted this practice have found, that this will not be too burdensome on authors and that it will be a good use of space. We also trust that change will come only if editors require it.

Given that our immediate peers have not moved in our direction, the decision was not made lightly. Over the past year, this journal tried to encourage authors to report. As other journals that sought merely to encourage have found, encouragement did not produce good results. Authors, much to the chagrin of editors, all too often exhibit a knack for not closely following instructions to authors, unless they are absolutely required to do so. As expected, our own initial efforts resulted in haphazard reporting and the information provided did not appear too useful if readers were not privy to it. As a result, the journal has moved toward requiring specific statements about authors' relative contributions as part of authors' acknowledgment sections. As with other journals that have adopted this practice, this will be required of multi-author research and data-based articles but not of editorials, book reviews, and other types of invited commentaries. In respect for authors' time and energy, especially since well over 80 % of manuscripts eventually are not accepted and all manuscripts undergo revision, this request will turn to an absolute requirement only with first revisions.

Requiring authors to report does not mean that they will provide valuable information. Given the potential diversity of contributions, it is not surprising that we can get a hodgepodge of responses that is difficult to interpret and standardize. As a result, we are offering authors a typical format. And, this is it:

... we suggest the following kind of format (please use initials to refer to each author's contribution): AB conceived of the study, participated in its design and coordination and drafted the manuscript; JY

participated in the design and interpretation of the data; MT participated in the design and coordination of the study and performed the measurement; ES participated in the design of the study and performed the statistical analysis; FG conceived of the study, and participated in its design and coordination and helped to draft the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

The above suggested blurb, coupled with further guidelines in the journal's instructions to authors, draws from the format and rationale suggested by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2012) and the American Psychological Association (2012). In addition, it draws from available research, such as studies indicating that more free-form formats are more effective to the extent that they produce more truthful results than simply "ticking" boxes detailing categories of contributions (see Marusic et al. 2006).

The above format notably embraces a system of contributorship rather than mere authorship, a system of contributors rather than authors. By focusing on the contribution of each individual to the manuscript, the approach seeks the accountability of that person to the manuscript's particular content. That approach emerges from the rationale that credit comes only with accountability and responsibility. Having authors publically accept responsibility for a particular contribution enables readers to ascribe credit objectively to the named individual and determine the article's overall credibility. The established tradition of simply naming and ordering authors no longer seems to make sense to the extent that it fails to be informative enough and to capture the contributions that can be done by contemporary researchers.

The focus on contribution highlights important matters relating to the extent to which published articles typically are considered as a whole. First, it shows that the traditional way of simply assigning authorship is problematic in that collaborators may have contributed to only portions of the article, and even the ordering of authors no longer appears sufficiently descriptive. Second, it raises the issue of whether a collaborator should be held responsible for another's contribution and who should take responsibility for the entire manuscript. There are many ways to approach this issue. The approach we adopt rests on the belief that specifically stating who is responsible for what will help. Third, it underscores the important point that all authors must approve the manuscript and thus take responsibility for it. A contributor who receives credit in the form of authorship must be willing to be held accountable for its contents, not merely responsibility for a portion of the involved work. Approval of the entire manuscript as a prerequisite for authorship may be a requirement that will

change in the future, as it has become a matter of controversy (see Wager 2006), but for now the requirement is quite settled and an important component of maintaining faith in the scientific enterprise and trust in what is published. Thus, we require authors to affirmatively and publicly state that they and their co-authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

The practice of requiring authors to vouch for an article's content reasonably rests on simple propositions. If someone does not have full confidence in a collaborator's work, then they should neither endorse nor be part of its final product, and they should not expect disinterested parties to have confidence in the product either. Likewise, requiring approval of the entire manuscript also means that not being responsible and accountable for the entire article says something about the collaboration, which most likely means that the collaborator deserves an acknowledgment rather than an authorship. These matters may be points of tension and disagreement among collaborators, but moving toward explicit statements of contributions likely helps to move these challenges in the right direction. In the end, collaborators are in the best position to determine the extent and integrity of each other's contributions; it makes sense to place on them the responsibility of accurately sharing that information. With credit comes responsibility, and vice versa.

The utility of this endeavor has yet to be demonstrated. Journals like ours, at least as judged by their instructions to authors, do not seem to evidence much overt concern with these issues. Still, lack of apparent interest in an issue does not mean that it should be ignored. It makes sense for us to move forward, as increasing transparency parallels the journal's other efforts to encourage greater responsibility to the field (Levesque 2006, 2011). At its core, the credit authors receive for their published work should be linked to their taking public responsibility for its contents, and that responsibility must start by clearly stating the content for which one takes responsibility. This is not to say that we are facing an epidemic of deceptive practices (but see Kowk

2005); it is to say that we will never really know their extent until we start identifying and shaping appropriate standards and practices that can be subjected to evaluations. Editors have responsibilities to readers and to the field's integrity, as much as they do to authors. That responsibility must start with knowing who actually are the contributors to the manuscript, who the authors actually are.

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