Authorship Order and Recognition

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Why is it relevant?

Authorship order is one of the main ways scientific credit is distributed and interpreted. Positions such as first, last, and corresponding author are often used to infer contribution, leadership, responsibility, and seniority. As a result, authorship order can influence hiring, promotion, funding opportunities, professional visibility, and career progression.

Because particular authorship positions have acquired significant value, discussions about authorship order are often sensitive and contested. At the same time, the meaning attached to these positions is not universal. Different disciplines rely on different conventions, and collaborators may hold different expectations about who should occupy particular positions and what those positions represent. When these assumptions remain implicit, authorship order can become a source of misunderstanding, disagreement, or tension within research teams.

Hidden assumptions

Authorship order is often treated as a straightforward representation of contribution. This assumes that different forms of work can be compared, arranged in a single sequence, and interpreted consistently by collaborators, readers, and evaluators.

In practice, these assumptions do not always hold. Different disciplines use different conventions, contributions may be difficult to compare directly, and the same authorship order may be understood in different ways.

Discussing authorship order

Authorship order is often treated as the outcome of a project. However, teams may benefit from discussing how authorship order will be determined. Making expectations, criteria, and decision-making processes explicit can help reduce misunderstandings and support more transparent discussions about recognition and credit.

Questions that may be useful to discuss include:

- What authorship conventions are relevant to this project?
- Which contributions are most important for this particular output?

- How will different forms of work be recognised and compared?
- How will changes in contribution be reflected if the project evolves?
- Who will participate in authorship order discussions?
- How will disagreements be addressed?

Because authorship order distributes recognition and opportunity, all contributors share responsibility for ensuring that the process is understood and open to discussion.

Case Study

The CLEAR Lab, led by Max Liboiron, developed an “Equity in Author Order” protocol to support discussions about authorship order. Rather than beginning with individual authors, the process starts by identifying the forms of labour that made the project possible and discussing which contributions were most central to the work. The team then maps contributors to these forms of labour and collectively discusses how authorship order should be established. The protocol also encourages researchers to reflect on how different forms of work are recognised and how existing inequalities may shape authorship decisions.

References

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