Making Authorship Decisions

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Decisions about authorship are rarely straightforward. They determine how recognition, responsibility, and accountability are distributed across a research team and can have significant implications for careers and professional reputation. Contributors may hold different expectations about what should be recognised, how contributions should be valued, and how credit should be allocated. For this reason, discussions about authorship benefit from taking place throughout the research process rather than only at the point of publication.

Discussions about authorship often focus on contributions, authorship order, and recognition. However, teams may also benefit from discussing how authorship decisions themselves will be made. In some projects, decisions emerge through collective discussion; in others, specific responsibilities may be delegated to particular team members. Rather than assuming a process, teams can make decision-making procedures explicit from the outset and revisit them as projects evolve.

Ongoing discussions reduce misunderstandings and prevent last-minute conflicts.

Why is it relevant?

Early discussions about authorship can help make a sensitive topic part of everyday project conversations. They provide an opportunity to clarify expectations, discuss how contributions may be recognised, and establish how authorship decisions will be approached as the project develops. Authorship expectations do not disappear when they are left unspoken; they are often replaced by assumptions about contribution, recognition, and responsibility. Discussing these issues early helps make those assumptions visible and open to discussion.

These conversations may also be shaped by differences in seniority, disciplinary background, and institutional position. For further discussion of these issues, see the companion Fact Sheet: *Power and Authorship*.

Practical Steps

Questions that may be useful to revisit throughout a project include:

- Who is currently contributing to the project, and in what ways?
- Does our current list of potential authors still reflect the contributions being made?
- Have contributions changed in ways that may affect authorship or authorship order?
- Are team members comfortable with how authorship is currently being discussed and understood?
- Are there upcoming publications, patents, or other outputs that require authorship discussions?
- Have any concerns, uncertainties, or differing expectations emerged that should be discussed?
- Does the team agree on how authorship decisions will be approached if contributions continue to evolve?

Common pitfalls

- Treating authorship as a discussion that only needs to happen at the end of a project.
- Assuming contributors share the same expectations about recognition, responsibility, and authorship.
- Allowing authorship decisions to develop through assumptions rather than discussion.
- Overlooking less visible forms of contribution.
- Avoiding conversations when expectations, roles, or contributions change.
- Assuming that all contributors want the same level or type of authorship recognition.

Key message

Authorship is not simply a technical decision made at the end of a project. It is one of the primary ways research contributions, recognition, responsibility, and accountability become associated with particular individuals. Keeping authorship discussions visible

throughout a project can help teams navigate changing contributions, differing expectations, and future decisions about recognition and responsibility.

Case Study

A paper published in Nature Communications was later retracted following a dispute among the listed authors. According to reports, several co-authors stated that they had not been informed of the manuscript submission and had not agreed to be included as authors. The case highlights that authorship involves more than recognising contributions. It also requires communication, agreement, responsibility, and accountability for the work being published.

References

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