Power and Authorship

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Authorship decisions are not made in a neutral environment. They are shaped by hierarchies, institutional roles, and career expectations. Senior researchers often have greater influence over decisions, while early-career researchers may hesitate to question them.

Why is this difficult to address?

- Power differences are often implicit rather than explicit
- Challenging decisions can carry professional risks
- Norms vary across disciplines and teams
- Silence is often interpreted as agreement

As a result, inequities in authorship may persist without being openly recognised.

Why is it relevant?

Some contributors are included to increase credibility rather than reflect contribution (honorary authorship). Others are excluded despite significant involvement.

Early-career researchers may accept unfavourable positions to avoid conflict Decisions may be made informally, without open discussion. These dynamics can affect both recognition and accountability.

Practical Steps

1. *Acknowledge power dynamics*. Not all team members participate on equal terms.
2. *Create space for discussion*. Use regular conversations to avoid informal, unspoken decisions.
3. *Support participation*. Ensure all contributors, including early-career researchers, can express their views.

4. *Share responsibility.* Avoid relying on individual authority.
5. *Make decisions transparent*. Clarify criteria and record agreements where possible.

Common pitfalls [1]

- Assuming authorship decisions are purely merit-based
- Ignoring how hierarchy influences outcomes
- Avoiding difficult conversations
- Treating silence as consent
- Relying on informal agreements

Key message

Authorship order is not a neutral or universally understood system. Clear, explicit discussions are necessary to ensure that it reflects contributions fairly and is understood consistently by all collaborators.

Case Study

A well-known, historical example of power dynamics shaping scientific credit is the discovery of the DNA double helix. This foundational breakthrough is most commonly associated with James Watson and Francis Crick, who were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962. However, the contributions of English chemist and crystallographer, Rosalind Franklin, are often omitted in this story of discovery. Elements of her unpublished work were shared with Watson and Crick without her permission and were crucial evidence for the helical structure of DNA. While her own findings were published alongside theirs, her contribution was not given equivalent prominence at the time. Although historians continue to debate the extent to which Franklin's data was misused, this case illustrates how power dynamics, access to data, and institutional position can influence both authorship and the allocation of scientific credit.

References

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