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COMMENTARY

Gift authorship: Two more contexts

TR DILIP

Abstract: The emergence of multi-centric studies and collaborative research between institutions within and outside the country, and of research led by authors who are from the same family, has led to noteworthy changes in the production of public health research evidence from India. There is a potential risk of research publications overlooking the well known ICMJE

(International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) criteria for authorship, with the provision of gift authorship to researchers who can facilitate faster access to Indian data for such collaborative research. The paper calls for action to reduce the practice of gift authorship in these research settings.

Keywords: Authorship, India, ICMJE, gift authorship

The paper “Gift authorship: Look the gift horse in the mouth” is an excellent exposition of the causes and consequences of the practice of gift authorship, not only in research on medical and related issues but also in the entire academic domain in India [1]. It can act as a starting point for a campaign against such practices. Periodic discussion on these issues is needed in order to restrain researchers from being part of such misconduct. This commentary is an attempt to include in this discussion two emerging trends in health research in India where there is a high risk of gift

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authorship. The scenarios discussed here are important in the country's health research landscape due to the increasing presence of collaborative publications with a long list of authors from India and high-income countries. This is reflective of the changing landscape of production of public health research evidence from India.

The first such trend is of gift authorship in the name of foreign collaborative research sometimes involving several dozen, or even a few hundred researchers as authors within India and across the world. Here, the role of some of the authors seems to be restricted to providing empirical data from their country/population, or specific information from their work settings. A closer examination will show that a number of them appear to have been gifted authorship and have never published on related issues in their lifetime.

The application of the authorship criteria of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), including for authorship in studies conducted by large groups [2], could have eliminated these authors from the publication. In line with the ICMJE guidelines, several published works have clearly distinguished between authors of an article and collaborators involved in generating data used in that article. Here, a smaller group will be formed among collaborators who will author the article on behalf of all the collaborators. However, these guidelines are not always followed in some of the multi-authored works published in major journals. For example, in the following article [3], the difference between "collaborator" and "contributor" is not clear, nor is it clear how both qualify as "author". In another instance [4], some authors were only involved in coordinating the studies within the country and providing comments on the drafts, as described in the contributors' statement of the paper. It states, "All other authors coordinated the study in their respective countries and provided comments on drafts of the manuscript". A conservative reading of the ICMJE criteria of authorship may possibly have included these as "contributors" and not authors.

Most collaborative research exercises involve multimillion dollar funding where the primary authors who drive these exercises are based in internationally reputed institutes abroad. The unspoken motive of the lead authors in including certain people as authors in such contexts is to get speedy access to data or information from various corners of the world. For this, they need to please all those custodians of data/information. Their need to make offers of authorship could be one reason why they ignore the ICMJE standards for authorship. Those accepting authorship just for sharing the data may note that it is primarily their official position that has enabled them to share the data that the external partners are looking for. They are not owners of the national or subnational data that was shared as part of the collaboration, and their capacity to share it ceases with the completion of their tenure in their positions.

Another side of this coin is the practice of sharing authorship with public health leaders or those who provide stewardship

for the relevant health programme which is to be promoted, so long as they endorse the contents of the article. The whole point of this exercise is defeated if the authorship comes with a rider that the views expressed are personal and are not those of their institutions.

The second trend is of gift authorship in research involving family members including spouses, children and other relatives. These researchers come together as a familial enterprise which drives the original research. Such researchers are frequently affiliated to research institutes in the country. Of course, most often, these enterprises do take support from other researchers and they are often seen collaborating with the research initiatives of reputed institutions from abroad as mentioned above. After all, the domain of academic research may not remain detached in an era of dynastic domination in every sector, ranging from business and politics, to films and sports. Interestingly, some enterprising familial groups have successfully established a cohort database system in their respective research domains with information on human subjects who were followed up over a period of time. This entitles them to be custodians of a reliable database, which naturally becomes attractive for international collaborators seeking an evidence base from Indian study sites. The net result is that the names of all related members will appear as authors in publications where their custodial cohort data is used. In many situations, it is not clear if the provision of Indian data or fulfilment of ICMJE criteria by one family member has entitled all the researchers in the family to authorship. It is possible that some members of the family have been included due to their family enterprise of ownership of these data sets from an Indian setting.

This comment is neither against internationally funded multi-centric projects involving hundreds of researchers, nor against researchers from the same family conducting research and reporting on it, nor those engaged in both. The core issue is the high risk of gift authorship in these two settings. Proliferation of team-authored publications without due weightage for the contribution of the real authors is considered a threat to the integrity of science [5]. Most often, these research studies, especially in internationally driven research, are published in high impact journals, and those who were gifted authorship will have an edge over fellow researchers in India when it comes to career promotions, competition for research grants and bidding for research projects. The risk of such researchers claiming "subject expertise" on the basis of gift authorship, and their presence in national and subnational expert committees, evaluation panels and interview boards, is harmful to scientific advancement in any country, including India. Journal level initiatives to limit the number of authors have been found to have an impact in curbing such authorship practices among senior researchers in India [6]. Such initiatives are to be encouraged against the practice of an unrestricted number of authors claiming responsibility for the accuracy or integrity of

any part of a published work.

Note: References 3 and 4 are used to illustrate the issues analysed in this comment, in order for readers to understand the context of this discussion. There are several such examples in the public domain and the author has no intention of defaming the research undertaken by these and other researchers in large group studies.

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COMMENT

Attribution and credit bias in publication ethics

ALASTAIR MATHESON

Abstract

In this article, I argue that many of the ethical problems associated with the authorship of journal literature can usefully be clarified if authorship is placed within the broader concept of attribution, which extends beyond the author byline to encompass everything that readers are told about the work's origination and the parties responsible. I also suggest that as the attribution of literature has grown more complex, and the opportunities for misattribution have become more subtle and multifarious, attribution has become increasingly vulnerable to systematic bias. Accordingly, I define "credit bias" as the systematic distortion of attribution, frequently in the interests of those with influence over the publication. I present a four-step framework for evaluating publications, discuss misattribution in drug industry literature as an illustration of credit bias, and examine the role of editorial standards in mitigating, but also in assisting, credit bias. I also argue for an independent scientific standard to promote ethical conduct in the medical journal sector.

Keywords: attribution, authorship, contributorship, bias, publications, journals, ICMJE, CRediT

The ethics of authorship can be clarified in useful respects by considering the problem in terms of the broader *attribution* of intellectual content. The attribution of an article includes its authorship, but extends beyond the author byline to encompass everything that readers are told about the work's origination and the parties responsible. As I discuss below, some of the well-known ethical difficulties attending authorship, including ghostwriting and guest authorship, are better understood as manipulations of attribution rather than of authorship alone. I discuss the nature of attribution and argue that as the scope for misattribution has become subtler and more complex, it has become useful to think of attribution as being vulnerable to systematic bias. I refer to this form of bias herein as "credit bias". I also discuss the longstanding attempts by journal editors, bibliographers and others to improve the attribution of medical literature, and the implications of these measures for bias. My goal is to establish both attribution and credit bias as standard concepts in publication ethics and within the study of bias.

A simple stepwise framework for examining published content involves four stages [Table 1]. The first step is to clarify the publication's *setting* and *context* — that is, the location and format of the material that will be authored, its agenda and relationships to other content, and the standpoint from which it will be investigated. Here, I focus on medical journals. The second step is to examine the *stakeholders and contributors* — that is, everyone who

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