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Authorship: Refusing what you know you don't deserve

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Scientific writing and publishing are significant for an early-career researcher (ECR). For entry into doctoral studies, new jobs, or promotion, publications are among the essential requisites any selection committee will look for. Unlike interpersonal skills such as team building or communication, academic outputs are easier to assess and quantify but producing them may not always be easy for an ECR.

Challenges in publishing

Some common challenges faced in writing and publishing an academic piece include language barriers for those not fluent in English. There may also be a dearth of opportunities and time, particularly for those ECRs who spend a fair share of their time in administrative work, teaching assignments, clinical work, implementation activities or managing finances. Another common challenge is a lack of mentorship or overburdened mentors who have little interest or time to foster the growth of an ECR. Despite these systemic or structural challenges, a self-driven ECR can work around the hurdles and manage to come up with a draft manuscript.

Assigning authorship

A researcher who leads a manuscript is most likely to be the first author of the paper. The manuscript, however, may involve other contributors who may also be eligible to be authors. ECRs face the tough task of assigning authorship to all the eligible authors. Many are unfamiliar with the ethics of authorship and may assign it inappropriately. There are, therefore, guidelines to guide researchers on what constitutes authorship. But familiarising oneself with these guidelines may in fact make things trickier and more complex. The guidelines recommend discussing authorship at the start of work to avoid any conflicts thereafter [1]. However, an ECR may not be able to freely discuss authorship with more senior and experienced contributors. While the ECR understands and wants to follow the guidelines, there may be no guarantee of the same understanding from the other contributors.

Vulnerability of the ECR

What if the other contributors of the research team have a habit of granting authorship irrespective of eligibility? The ECR could run the risk of being considered an outlier for doing things differently. The situation can be particularly tricky when a team member with no significant contribution to the manuscript indicates an interest in being named as an author. Ignoring this interest can come at a cost, including that of mental health. The ECR knows that the research team, especially if working in a niche area, can be a source of future employment opportunities, and may also keep running into the team if research is continued in the same area. The compromised autonomy of the ECR and the profoundly hierarchical nature of the professional setup renders the person vulnerable. Knowing what is normatively good can actually make the decision-making process more difficult for the individual.

A way out?

But what if the other contributors were to come up to the ECR and declare upfront that they do not qualify and therefore should not be named as authors? Imagine a contributor declining the request of an ECR to be acknowledged for a contribution that does not merit acknowledgement. Would this not make the job of an ECR easier? The ECR would neither be scared about other contributors being unhappy nor feel guilty about assigning inappropriate authorship.

The responsibility that comes with power

The onus of ensuring appropriate authorship is often left to the lead author. This may not be fair when the lead author is an ECR working in a hierarchical setup. Those at the top of the hierarchy should be more accountable. This does not mean that those at the top should ultimately decide on the authorship for any manuscript. This means that it is more the responsibility of senior researchers to refuse to accept authorship without significant contributions, than that of the ECR to ensure that authorship is assigned appropriately. Can our publication ethics guidelines make this recommendation to all mid-career and senior researchers? The proper execution of this notion will undoubtedly free ECRs of the burden of navigating through complicated professional situations and leave them to focus on the quality of the manuscript.

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