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# Ethics Among Scholars in Academic Publishing

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## Abstract

This paper offers a survey of the contemporary and common-place ethical breaches concerning authorship, research, and publishing in today's scholarly production, as juxtaposed with some of the predominant standards and guidelines that have been developed to direct academic publishing practices. While the paper may suggest the need for an updated and comprehensive set of guidelines for multiple discipline areas, the purpose here is to prepare the theoretical framework for a future computing discipline-specific study of ethical authorship and related concepts in academia.

**Keywords:** ethical publication, ethical research, authorship disputes, promiscuous publication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A brief review of non-discipline based literature concerning research disputes will show that "the emphasis on scholarly production appears to have contributed to an increase in research and writing" (Gelman & Gibelman, 2009). In turn, the number of authors per research paper has increased, causing "accountability [to be] dislocated from credit, and disputes and abuses of authorship to increase" (Afifi, 2004). In addition, a number of disconcerting practices have emerged in academic publishing that, over time, has deteriorated the quality and vigor of academic research, the publication of their findings, and the quality of the journals themselves. (Strange, 2008; Gelman & Gibelman, 2009).

Some of the more common, long-standing concerns include research integrity and vigor, truthful data reporting and an accurate analysis. We can see the penalties for such misconduct in the 1980's John Darsee affairs and the falsified studies at Emory and Harvard universities, and the 1995 Malcome Pearce fraud issue reporting non-existent work in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology (Broad, 1983; Reiman, 1983; Smith, 2006). Made clear is the

profound, negative impact research misconduct can have on one's reputation and career; however, a serious by-product of this misconduct has repercussions on the others who appear in the author list. In some cases, that authorship can occur without the named person even being aware. (Seeman & House, 2010a). In most cases, this occurs when individuals accept authorship on the respective publications "as something to be conferred as a benefit rather than earned through taking responsibility" (Afifi, 2004).

With the "increasing pressure on faculty to 'publish or perish', breaches in authorship ethics have reached the level of crisis in academic publishing" (Dighe & Berquist, 2011). We now see more cases of self plagiarism and duplicate publications, "trivial scholarship", and an improper proliferation of authors on papers as well as the proliferation of lower-standard journals. (Bennett & Taylor, 2003; Gelman & Gibelman, 2009).

Academics have always been considered a life choice serving the greater good; as such, one would hope that the concept of what is ethical versus unethical, in terms of publishing and giving credit, would be innate in an individual

choosing such a career. (Virchow, 1977 as cited in Strange, 2008). In times where the waters may become muddied, academicians look to publication guides, discipline-specific codes of ethics, and professional organization's codes of conduct. Those in the medical field may turn to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2012); physical sciences, such as Chemistry, for example, may choose the American Chemical Society's *ACS Publications Ethical Guidelines to Publication of Chemical Research* (ACS, 2012). Even still, it is reported that these guidelines are "not known, or followed by many researchers and even difficult to understand or apply" (Afifi, 2004).

A more general resource can be found at the National Science Foundation's Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) site. (NSF, 2011). Moore's introductory document found here opens with "at present, there is no single site or source that covers all of the ethical dilemmas and laws that govern science and technology research" (NSF, 2011). This member of the Science, Technology and Society Program – Ethics Education in Science and Engineering Program for the NSF, goes on to inform the reader that, in the U.S., responsibility on researchers is governed in a variety of ways, including subject areas, agencies, and the norms that exist in different fields of studies. As a result, a list of general resources is offered as "a starting point to assist in locating the needed materials", with the starting point listed as "your professional association" (NSF, 2011).

Two of the more prominent professional organizations governing research and publication in the computing disciplines, primarily those of Computer Science and Computer Engineering, are the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) (Solomon, 2009; also see ACM, 2010 and IEEE, 2012). Author Solomon reports, however, that neither of these organizations has released such a standard. He goes on to explain that "instead, these organizations have practiced a policy of 'salutary neglect' in which there exists an unwritten, informal, and oft-disregarded understanding that authorship [...] reflects some sort of considerable contribution to the development of the project described in the paper", resulting in inconsistencies in authorship credit (Solomon, 2009).

While the fields of Computer Information Systems and Information Technology also look to ACM, they, too, have more discipline-specific professional organizations to reference. For example, Computer Information Systems often reference the International Association of Computer Information Systems (IACIS, 2012) and Information Technology may turn to the ACM Information Technology Special Interest Group (ACM-SIGITE, 2012). Still, no standards in authorship – or patterns of formats and citation procedures – can be found. "Such irregularity has led to confusion over the nature of particular individuals' contributions to research project, squabbles over credit, and even legal action in some cases" (Solomon, 2009).

The void in consistent, discipline-specific research and publishing standards has evolved into practices that contravene the principle of ethical academic research and publishing in the computing disciplines. These more common, promiscuous practices are discussed.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING AUTHORSHIP

The order of authors, number of authors, and inclusion or omission of authors stands first in most guides to publication practices and responsible authorship. In its most basic sense, "author" is the originator, creator and writer of a work (Author, 2012). When it comes to research and/or the creation of new technologies, authorship encompasses more roles with varying contributions. Rennie, et al, purport that this is due, in part, to an increased complexity in the work of contributors due to specialization (Rennie, Yank, Emanuel, 1997). More recent analyses, however, consistently point to a more intentional dilution of credit and authorship (see Kwok, 2005; Strange, 2008; Dighe & Berquist, 2011).

Almost all treatise on ethical publication and authorship practices will reference the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) standards, which state that an author is someone who has made substantial contributions to the work and assumed responsibility for what is published. (ICMJE, 2012). This is expounded, in the ICMJE *Uniform Requirements*, to include three criteria that must be met in order to be listed as an author:

- Authorship credit should be based on 1) substantial contributions to conception

and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article, revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3 (ICMJE page 2).

Three primary reasons are offered as to why these criteria are not followed. 1. The criteria are so restrictive, given the sheer manpower requirements for an in-depth research project, that they are simply not followed (Bennett & Taylor, 2003); 2. Researchers are not aware of their existence (Bhopal, Rankin, McColl, 1997); 3. The quest for publications is greater than the value in upholding the integrity of authorship as an "oath or a testimony" (Kwok, 2005; Rennie et al, 1997).

In contrast to these more restrictive guidelines in authorship extended to the medical community, a brief survey of some computing journals and conferences show that computing disciplines often use American Psychological Association (APA) style for their publication submissions. Concerning authorship, the APA guidelines state that "authorship includes not only those who do the writing, but also those who make substantial intellectual contributions to the work. Such substantial contributions include conceptualizing and formulating the problem, designing the study or research protocol, conducting the statistical analyses, interpreting the results, and writing the paper" (Canter, Bennett, Jones, Nagy, 1994 cited in Gelman & Gibleman, 1999; APA, 2010). These criteria are so all-inclusive that, given a large, in-depth research or technological development, the author list could grow to extremes. This brings us to the first area of questionable authorship – that of Exaggerated Authorship.

### **Exaggerated Authorship**

In its most basic form, exaggerated authorship occurs when non-contributors, or minimal contributors are included in the author list of a publication. Two editors of the American Journal of Roentgenology reported a 62% increase from 2000 to 2010 in the number of scientific articles published, and with this an increase in the number of authors appearing on each article; yet only 64% of these fulfilled the ICMJE criteria for authorship (Dighe & Berquist, 2011).

Author lists can become so bloated that it is impossible to discern even the key team of researchers. One such example is a major supercomputing breakthrough called BlueGene/L, developed by from IBM and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The 16-page conference proceeding contains 115 names in the author list. (Soloman, 2009).

When the guidelines for authorship are either exaggerated or simply not followed, the results can be professionally devastating, particularly for junior faculty and researchers. In his very frank and eye-opening article entitled *The White Bull effect: abusive coauthorship and publication parasitism*, Kwok describes both the actions and personality traits of "unscrupulous senior collaborators" as the "White Bull effect", a term drawn from Greek mythology to describe fraudulent behavior for personal gain (Kwok, 2005). Kwok is not off the mark. The following describe the prevalently-documented results of authorship distortion, many of which meet the White Bull criteria.

### **Coercive Authorship**

Coercive Authorship, occurs when "authorship [has been] conferred to individuals in response to their exertion of seniority or supervisory status over subordinates and junior investigators" (Strange, 2008; see also Bennett & Taylor, 2003; Claxton, 2005 as cited in Strange, 2008; Kwok, 2005). In some cases, this can be as blatant as a the head of a department requiring authorship on all papers published from his/her department or threats made to authors to withhold university resources if authorship is not granted (Strange, 2008).

Most cases of coercive authorship employ more subtle tactics, where the author criteria are met with token efforts, but the criteria are not met in intent or spirit (Kwok, 2005). And in other cases, junior authors are simply misled into believing that the inclusion of a senior collaborator will give their work more merit and better chances of publication. (Bennett & Taylor, 2003) This brings us to the next form of unethical authorship – guest or honorary authorship.

### **Honorary, Gift or Guest Authorship**

Also termed "promiscuous authorship" (Strange, 2008) and "graft authors" (Bennett & Taylor, 2003), this is the practice of awarding

authorship to someone who has not made a substantial, intellectual contribution to the paper. The practice is viewed as "intellectually dishonest, deceptive, unethical, and causes dilution of credit for scientific work and the validity of a paper" (Bennett & Taylor, 2003). Unlike coercive authorship where threats and intimidation are used, the mode of operation here mostly stems from greed – either of money or accolades. Some descriptions follow:

- As previously mentioned, "honorary authorship" can occur as an attempt to promote a paper by including a better-known author (Bennett & Taylor, 2003).
- "Gift authorship" is used as a tool to repay favors such as referrals or references and rewards – an example being the inclusion of lab technicians as a reward for their work toward a project that was really nothing more than their day-to-day job (Strange, 2008).
- Including someone as a "guest author" might be done to encourage collaboration among faculty. In many cases, however, the latter results in a failed quid pro quo, where one researcher includes colleagues who have made no contribution to the research, expecting the same in return in the future, which never materializes (Rennie et al, 1997).

### **Mutual Support and Ghost Authorship**

In the quest for productivity, whether on a personal level or a corporate level, authorship can be used as a tool for appearances, as in the following:

- "Mutual support" authorships occur as a pre-meditated agreement between peers. Here, two or more investigators agree to "place their names on each other's papers to give the appearance of higher productivity" (Strange, 2008).
- A "ghost author" is a professional writer whose role is not acknowledged. Many examples exist in the pharmaceutical industry, where a professional writer is hired to develop the marketing information for a product. But instead of the true author's name appearing on the publication, another professional, such as a medical doctor, is hired to endorse the product by signing their name to the written work. (Gotzsche, Hrobjartsson, Johansen, Haahr, Altman, Chan, 2007).

### **Denial of Authorship and Omission of Credit or Acknowledgement**

"A published article is the primary means whereby new work is communicated, priority is established, and academic promotion is determined" (Rennie et al, 1997). Receiving credit is a serious matter, not only for the individual, but to the academic community as a whole. Accountability and responsibility are associated with credit, both of which set the basis for a given research being extended. If the scientific community is to be trusted, then what is published must be truthful and accurate – part of which is maintaining the ability to pinpoint experts in a given work.

Denial of authorship occurs when individuals meeting the merit of authorship are intentionally omitted. (Strange, 2008). Most upstanding researchers and authors would agree that "denial of authorship can rightfully be considered a form of plagiarism and therefore scientific misconduct" (Strange, 2008). The sad truth is that the Office of Research Integrity does not consider cases that stem from authorship disputes and defers them (Horner & Minifie, 2011). In a comprehensive, three-part series of articles on research ethics, authored by Horner and Minifie in 2011, these authors report that even though authorship and publication credit disputes are epidemic in the sciences, the Office of Research Integrity does not consider them a form of scientific misconduct. Federal rules stipulate that to be deemed such misconduct, the action must meet the criteria of plagiarism; that is, "the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property and/or the substantial unattributed textual copying of another's work" (Horner & Minifie, 2011; orig. Dahlberg, 2007, p.4).

This does not prohibit their entry into the legal system, and ultimately into the media, again referencing the misconduct affair of John Darsee in the 1980's and Malcome Pearce fraud of 1995 (Broad, 1983; Relman, 1983; Smith, 2006). Such happenings portray the culture of scientific publication as one of dishonesty, are detrimental to scientific progress, and which "debases the currency of authorship"(Rennie et al, 1997; Horner & Minifie, 2011).

Credit and/or acknowledgements should be extended when contributors to a research, a publication, or even a grant, do not meet the criteria of authorship (Dighe & Berquist, 2011).

The Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Principles of Ethical Conduct's definition of credit is to "fully and appropriately acknowledge the contributions of others in their work, whether the contributions are made through collaboration, publication of previous work, or other means" (ASHE, 2003). "Other means", while vague, has been interpreted by authors to include such things as collaboration in generating the research concept and contributions to panel proposals and discussions that led to the research (Gelman & Gibelman, 2009). Discussed later is the concept presented from authors who propose the use of an annotated credit section in lieu of authors to more accurately reflect credit and pinpoint specific areas of expertise to extend a given area of research (Horner & Minifie, 2011; Rennie et al, 1997).

### **3. UNETHICAL PUBLICATION PRACTICES AND IRREGULARITIES**

As academic institutions increase the pressure placed on their faculty to produce publications, a number of questionable practices have developed, all of which have been created to give the appearance of increased productivity.

#### **Scholarship Stretching and Duplicate Publication Methods**

The strategy here, while taking on various methods, is to create as many publications as possible from a single study or theme:

- "Self-plagiarism", as defined by the ACM Policy and Procedures on Plagiarism, is one method wherein the author uses "verbatim or near-verbatim reuse of significant portions of one's own copyrighted work without citing the original source" (ACM, 2010). Here, the author(s) submit virtually the same work to different journals or conferences with minimal changes to each submission (Bennett & Taylor, 2003).
- A variation of this is "divided publication", which can occur in two ways. One instance occurs where near identical papers, having the same author list, are submitted to separate journals (Bennett & Taylor, 2003). The second occurs when exact, or near exact versions of a paper, authored by more than one collaborator, is submitted to different journals or conferences, under each single, collaborator name as the sole author (Bennett & Taylor, 2003).

- A related strategy that does not involve self-plagiarism, per se, is to determine the "Least Publishable Units (LPU) of a study and submit many smaller length papers to multiple journals or conferences. Coined "Salami Science" by Mooney in 1991, this describes the "tendency to 'milk' themes and research findings to their smallest denominator [...] in order to ensure several publications from one study" (Gelman & Gibelman, 2009; orig. Mooney, 1991).

All of these practices are difficult for journal editors to police since it is not to the submitters' interest to inform the editors of related submissions that may exist. They tax the limited resources of scientific publishing, "including the time and expense of peer reviewing, increased press and postage costs for journals, and the costs of multiple indexing and abstracting" (Bennett & Taylor, 2003). What's more is that it is confusing, and even misleading, to truth-seeking researchers attempting electronic literature searches based on subject matter, and can ultimately result in an unintentional misrepresentation or inaccuracy of future publications (Bennett & Taylor, 2003; Rennie et al, 1997).

#### **Trivial Scholarship and Journal Proliferation**

These two concepts are somewhat related in that they are both devised to accommodate 'the need to publish' without regard to the value added to the existing body of knowledge.

"Trivial scholarship" is just that – it is a study of convenience and ease, where the initiative is undertaken more to meet the need to publish as opposed to an intellectual curiosity or a means to valuable reporting (Gelman & Gibelman, 2009; orig. Mooney, 1991). Other examples occur when the area of study is intentionally designed to be overly obscure and/or narrow. This is done so that, to the letter of the law, the work is, in fact, unique or individual, when the reality is that it might be virtually identical in design and method to something that has already been undertaken and reported.

The chances of such work being accepted for publication in a long-standing and reputable journal are slim. What has resulted is "journal proliferation". Authors Gelman and Gibelman report that this increase in journals to accommodate the need to publish does not equate to more and better scholarship. Their

assessment shows a significant percentage of publishing outlets have a small circulation and short life span (Gelman & Gibelman, 2009). It is reasonable to deduce that if the journal contents don't offer much by way of intellectual creativity or breakthrough, they will not have an audience beyond those publishing in them, keeping their circulation low and stunting their chance of long-term survival.

#### 4. PROPOSALS FROM THE LITERATURE

Even though the purpose of this paper is not to suggest new guidelines or legislation to stop these breaches in ethical publication practices from occurring, some of those offered in the literature are worth brief mention. The following compilation is offered to depict the variety of approaches currently offered:

- Make education in the ethics of research and publication compulsory (Dighe & Berquist, 2011; Gelman & Gibelman, 2009; Kwok, 2005);
- break down authors into levels to include First, Senior, Corresponding, Middle/Contributing, so as to enable readers to pinpoint areas of expertise (Strange, 2008);
- promote professional societies to take the lead in establishing a standardized code of research and publication (Kwok, 2005);
- drop the concept of author list entirely in lieu of a contributor list or a footnote paper which lists the exact contributions of each person (Bennett & Taylor, 2003);
- push academic institutions to alter their evaluation criteria and limit the number of publications that faculty can submit for tenure and promotion consideration (Rennie et al, 1997; Bennett & Taylor, 2003);
- instruct authors, through uniform requirements, to limit the number of authors to six (Bennett & Taylor, 2003);
- penalize journals that publish papers with known authorship disputes (Strange, 2008);
- draw attention to unethical practices that have resulted in print so as to employ embarrassment as a motivator (Rennie, et al, 1997);
- and finally, the extreme proposal to develop and administer personality and psychological profiling to ferret out the credit mongers most likely to practice promiscuous publication practices (Kwok, 2005).

Most of the literature referenced above also offered author-developed checklists and good-

sense advice to follow in order to ensure ethical behavior by all involved in a research and publication initiative. Additionally, some point to committees and organizations that, given the proper focus and academic audience agreement, could evolve to develop "the universal standard", cross-disciplinary set of codes and guidelines to be followed by all. One such noteworthy organization is the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). COPE is a forum for editors and publishers of peer-reviewed journals to discuss all aspects of publication ethics. Offered on this site, are guidelines and a code of conduct, best practices and advice, and even flow charts and an eCourse to help editors learn about, detect, and handle ethical misconduct of research and publications (COPE, 2012).

#### 5. FUTURE RESEARCH

What should be evident at this point is that there is nothing clear in assigning credit in scientific publication, that no consistent set of criteria delineating ethical practices in research and publications exists, and that the institution and means in policing any such standard is still up for debate.

What may not be so evident is that the vast majority of the literature that exists concerning breeches in ethical research and publication is coming from the bio-medical and related fields of study. Some do exist for the social sciences, and even a few are beginning to emerge from various physical sciences. However, those found for computing-related disciplines is scarce. And this author strongly purports that has nothing to do with a strong current of ethical practices among computing-related researchers and authors! Rather, and more likely, it is a discipline that has not yet been studied with research and publication ethics as the focus.

In the quest to explore this further, a series of publications concerning accountability, authorship practices and giving, not giving and rejecting credit in research and publications was uncovered in the Chemistry discipline. Authors and researchers, Jeffrey Seeman and Mark House (see Seeman & House, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) report on a thorough examination of the field of Chemistry using a 50-question, meticulously-constructed survey that was sent to 4,000 academic chemists in Ph.D. granting institutions in the United States. Their analysis, based on 600 respondents, is offered through this series. (see Seeman & House, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

The intent is a collaboration of Boff with Seeman & House, using the same instrument, to explore the topic of ethical research and publication practices in computing-related disciplines by sending the same, validated instrument to 4,000 faculty members teaching in computing disciplines in U.S. institutions granting terminal degrees in a computing-related field such as Computer Science, Computer Information Systems and Information Technology.

## 6. CONCLUSION

A disconcerting number of authorship disputes have emerged in academic publishing, that has brought to light the promiscuous research and publication practices that are becoming more dominant in academia. Due in great part to the pressure on faculty to publish as a measure of productivity, the lack of standardized and universal guidelines and an effective way to police their adherence augments an already disquieting situation.

The majority of literature available, concerning authorship disputes and unethical research and publication practices, has come from bio-medical related fields of study. The social sciences contribute as well, with some reporting beginning to emerge in the physical sciences. Minimal review of computing-relating publication practices has been reported. The purpose of this paper is to set the theoretical framework for a future study of the authorship and publication practices of the computing-related academic community.

It should be evident how important it is to our society and future that academicians value truth and accuracy in their research and publications. The following excerpt from Strange (2008) substantiates this:

Those who clamor inappropriately for scientific recognition, whether out of a sense of desperation and/or because of bloated and overwrought egos, would do our profession a valuable service by following the advice "[...]no one should argue ever again that... promiscuous authorship on scientific papers ... can be tolerated... research ethics matter immensely to the health of the scientific enterprise. Anyone who thinks differently should seek employment in another sphere." (Strange, 2008, C573; orig. *Nature*, 2006).

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