

Safety in Numbers?

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BioScience

American Institute of Biological Sciences

Safety in Numbers?

Editors attending editors' conferences like to scare each other with (sometimes apocryphal) horror stories. One perennial favorite goes along these lines: a manuscript with a large authorship roster was submitted to a journal for publication. The editor asked the corresponding author to detail the contribution of each author, and then the manuscript went through peer review. After reviews had been sent to the authors and they had been asked to make revisions, however, one of the supposed authors contacted the editor to protest that he had in fact never seen the manuscript in question, had not contributed to it, and indeed did not like it.

Yet this story is not apocryphal: these events occurred not so long ago at *BioScience*. Luckily, the presumed coauthor was removed from the authorship roster before publication; the corresponding author explained that he believed the expurgated author had been promised coauthorship in exchange for data, which did not make us feel much better. The episode stimulated some thoughts about who is and who is not an author, and how that should be communicated to would-be contributors.

The policy *BioScience* adopted, which closely follows the policy recommended by Washington University, can be read at www.aibs.org/bioscience/authors_and_reviewers. All authors must have made a significant contribution to the conception and design or the interpretation of the work, must have participated in drafting or reviewing it for content, and must have approved the final version. Given that scientific credit and, possibly, funding are granted largely on the basis of authorship—and that blame will surely be shared if an article turns out to be faulty—anything less risks diluting authors' shared responsibility for the article's content.

Unarguable as this policy may appear, it conflicts with the traditional practice of listing honorary authors on articles, as well as with the promise of coauthorship "in exchange for data." (Two other listed coauthors of the problematic manuscript referred to above modestly moved themselves to the acknowledgments section after we promulgated the new policy.) Collaborators who help just by providing data should be thanked, but they are not authors on that account. The policy might also cause headaches for organizers of workshops, whose natural inclination is to list all the participants as authors of a subsequent publication. But they are necessary headaches.

In any case, if Roosa Leimu and Julia Koricheva are right (see their article, which begins on p. 438), the advantages of multiple authorship have been exaggerated. Collaboration with colleagues in other departments of one's institution apparently reduced citation rates of papers published in one ecology journal, and international collaboration did not significantly enhance the articles' scientific impact.

Nobody would argue against scientific collaboration. But its success in yielding genuine new insights is far from guaranteed. And it seems possible that group dynamics (and a shared desire to impress funding agencies) may escalate pressure to make claims for and to publish a manuscript that an individual author would have realized needed more time and more work. The resulting multiauthored product may clutter rather than clarify. Since we all have too much to read already, that is a scary thought.

TIMOTHY M. BEARDSLEY
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