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Co-authorship in the Humanities and Social Sciences

A global view

A white paper from Taylor & Francis



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About Taylor & Francis Group, Bruce Macfarlane,
and Acknowledgements



1 Introduction

Authorship of a scholarly journal article claims recognition for a contribution to an original piece of research, along with any moral or legal rights that confers. Authorship credits are also an increasingly important currency of academia, vital for career progression, funding, and success in research assessments¹. It is therefore not surprising that the issue of authorship is under significant scrutiny and is among the most common concerns in publishing ethics².

CO-AUTHORSHIP, OR MULTIPLE AUTHORSHIP, of journal articles has long been a feature of academic scholarship. It has however been a more frequent product of research activities in science, technology, and medicine (STM); such as the output of scientists working together in the same lab. In the humanities and social sciences (HSS) academic writing has more often been considered a solo pursuit, with single-authored works valued more highly.

There has therefore been greater discussion in STM fields about the practical and ethical issues that can arise from research collaboration³. The widely-used guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors⁴ (the 'Vancouver protocol') define the criteria for an authorship credit in such circumstances but there is little comparable guidance for HSS authors and editors.

Is it still a minority of HSS articles that have more than one author? And are those HSS researchers who do collaborate equipped for the accompanying challenges? This project set out to answer those questions, surveying the current views and experiences of HSS authors and editors around the world. It builds on some of the themes explored in *Peer review in 2015: a global view* and provides a deeper understanding of academic opinions on these issues.

It is the result of a collaboration between Taylor & Francis and Bruce Macfarlane, Professor of Higher Education and and Head of School of Education, University of Bristol, UK. Professor Macfarlane has researched issues connected to academics in their teaching, research and service roles for the past 25 years.

¹ Bruce Macfarlane, 'The ethics of multiple authorship: power, performativity and the gift economy' *Studies in Higher Education* (42:7), 2017

² *What constitutes authorship? COPE Discussion Document*, Committee on Publication Ethics, 2014

³ Bruce Macfarlane, 'The paradox of collaboration: a moral continuum', *Higher Education Research & Development* (36:3), 2017

⁴ *Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly work in Medical Journals*, ICMJE, 2016 (www.icmje.org)



"Research has now become more project based [with] closely integrated teams of researchers"

Editor, Finland



"I enjoy the collaborative process"

Editor, Education, Canada



2 Key findings

Co-authorship is increasingly typical

74% of respondents reported that the typical number of authors per paper in their area of expertise is now two or more. Over half of respondents believe the incidence of co-authorship has increased since the beginning of their research careers. The most common reason identified for this growth of co-authorship was 'increasing competition and greater performance-based pressures'.

Researchers encounter problems attributing authorship fairly

Co-authorship is not without its challenges. When asked about the most commonly occurring problems associated with co-authorship, the highest scoring responses related to the order in which author names should be listed and determining who should receive an authorship credit. Where no author has made a dominant contribution, respondents believe authors should either be listed jointly as first authors or should be listed alphabetically.

There is an authorship attribution 'reality gap'

There are conditions regarded as being important for determining an authorship claim in practice which respondents do not believe would have significance in an ideal world. In practice, too much weight is placed on being a senior ranked researcher, the supervisor

of a doctoral student, or a research grant holder. As a result, respondents believe that there is a tendency for senior academics to be over-credited and junior ranked academics to be under-credited in comparison to other authors.

Instead, researchers believe that an authorship credit should go to those who are responsible for the conception and/or design of a project; the analysis and/or interpretation of data; or drafting the paper or revising it critically for intellectual content.

Few researchers receive guidance and training on authorship

Only 25% of respondents reported that guidance on authorship is included in the research ethics policy of their institution. Just 18% have received training or guidance from their institution in respect to determining academic authorship.

Editors and reviewers would intervene if they suspected incorrect authorship attribution

The majority of editors surveyed would ask the corresponding author of a paper to amend the authorship list if they believed an uncredited research assistant had made a substantial contribution to the paper. Most reviewers would also give advice to the journal editor to take this course of action.



Survey notes and responses

An online survey was distributed in June 2016 to 9,180 HSS researchers, comprising editors of Taylor & Francis journals, non-Taylor & Francis editors, and authors of articles published in Taylor & Francis HSS journals. The survey included 13 questions about authorship and training followed by a scenario section, which presented researchers with a hypothetical situation to respond to from the perspective of their primary role in the publishing process. A total of 894 participants (10%) from 62 countries completed all or part of the survey anonymously.

Region	Emails Sent		Responses to Survey			Response Rate
	Count	%	Count	%	Indicator	
Africa	302	3%	36	4%	–	12%
Australasia	665	7%	87	10%	▲	13%
Central & South Asia	72	1%	8	1%	–	11%
Europe	3,593	39%	351	39%	–	10%
Latin America	131	1%	24	3%	▲	18%
Middle-East	209	2%	27	3%	–	13%
No country	344	4%	7	1%	▼	2%
South East Asia	491	5%	49	5%	–	10%
USA & Canada	3,373	37%	305	34%	▼	9%
Grand Total	9,180		894		–	

The penultimate column contains an indicator to show whether the region is **under-represented** (▼) in the survey sample, compared to its size in the sent-to list; **over-represented** (▲); or whether the survey sample **matches** (–) the send-to list.

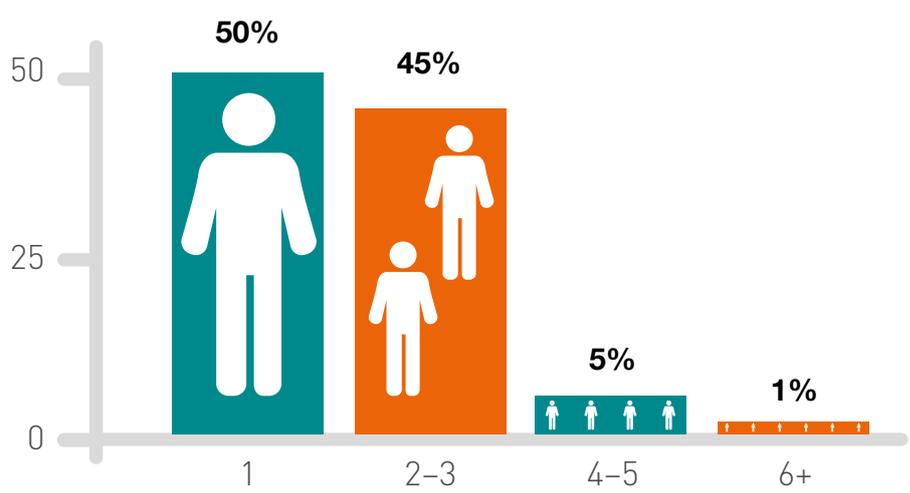


3 Growth of co-authorship

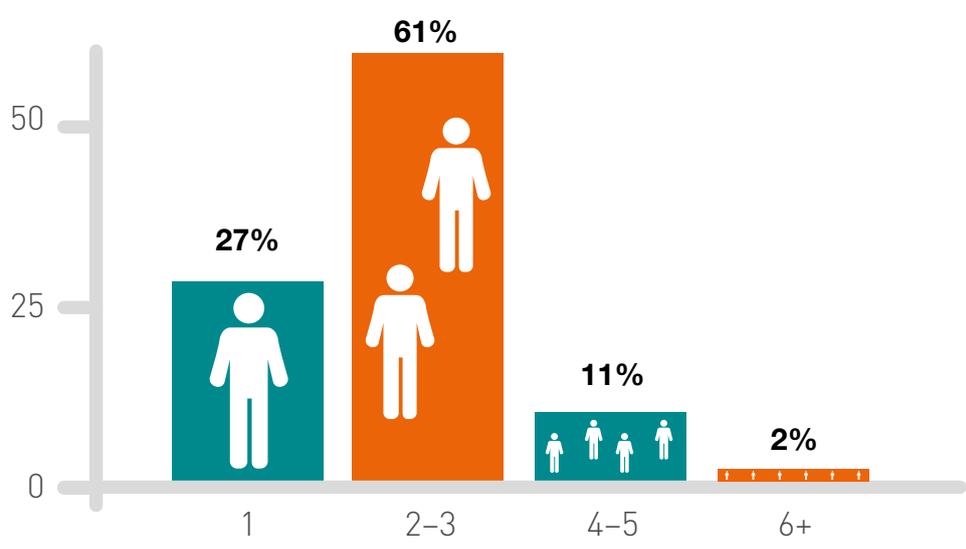
HSS researchers believe that co-authorship is increasingly typical. When asked to compare the frequency of co-authorship when they began their research career to the situation now, over half of respondents (56%) reported that it has increased.

The survey also asked about the typical number of authors for a paper in their area of academic expertise. Respondents believe that **an HSS paper is now more likely than not to have multiple authors**. While half of papers had a single author at the beginning of respondents' academic careers, this has now reduced to only 27%. Two or three authors is now considered to be the typical number per paper in HSS.

Typical number of authors per paper at beginning of research career



Typical number of authors per paper currently





Why is co-authorship more common?

Supporting career progression

Respondents most commonly attributed this growth in co-authorship to increasing competition and the performance-based pressures in academic life. The requirement to have new publications to their name is particularly strong for early career researchers trying to launch their careers. This was the explanation given by several senior academics as to why they include their students as co-authors; a process described more negatively by an Education researcher from the UK, as the “increased exploitation of research students”. The pressure to have a steady flow of publications is certainly significant for academics at all levels and so collaboration is regarded as a solution for getting more papers published, more quickly.



“The need to publish more to be promoted and tenured means that cooperative authorship seems a good return on investment.”

Reviewer, Library & Information Science, USA

The ease of collaboration

The next most highly scoring motivation was the growth of opportunities to collaborate internationally. Scholars are benefitting from research networks and funding to support collaboration. Respondents also commented on the role of technology, with a Humanities researcher in the UK highlighting the ease of working on the same text electronically.

Changes in research

The nature of the research being undertaken may also require greater collaboration. The growth of multi-disciplinary work, which benefits from the sharing of perspectives, scored relatively highly. New methodology, such as participatory research, is also having an influence. A cultural studies researcher from the USA noted that subjects who have collaborated in such projects “expect to be recognized as contributing to the conceptualization”. Large-scale projects, which would be too much for an individual researcher, are

now more common than they were. A geographer from the UK reported that many more activities in their field are bigger and longer-term.

Co-authorship is accepted and sometimes expected

A Library & Information Science researcher from Canada noted the increased acceptability of co-authored papers in meeting tenure standards and a number of respondents mentioned the requirements by grant agencies for interdisciplinary teams. This reflects a rise spotted by many in the perceived value of collaboration by authors and academic administrators. If two heads are better than one, then a benefit may also be improved scholarship. One Education scholar from Canada commented that the collaborative process produces “higher quality thinking”.

Reasons for rising rates of co-authorship

Extent that the following reasons help explain rising rates of co-authorship. Mean ratings out of 10, from 1 (not at all) to 10 (completely).





4 Challenges of co-authorship

While some respondents to the survey reported no problems relating to co-authorship, for many others there are clear challenges. Primarily these relate to the order in which author names should be listed and determining who should receive an authorship credit.

The most commonly occurring problems associated with co-authored papers.

Fairly listing the order of names

- Determining whether each named author has contributed sufficiently
- Inclusion of individuals who do not deserve an authorship credit
- Abuse of power to manipulate authorship order
- Exclusion of individuals who deserve an authorship credit

Listing author names

In what order should the authors' names appear on a paper? Should they be listed alphabetically, in order of seniority, or reflecting the relative levels of intellectual contribution to a paper? Tackling this question is the most commonly occurring problem of multi-authored papers.

It may be simple to decide if a research project has a clear driver or main contributor. In the words of an editor of an Education journal based in Australia, "The first named author should be the person who leads the writing team and contributes the most to the ideas and direction of the paper".

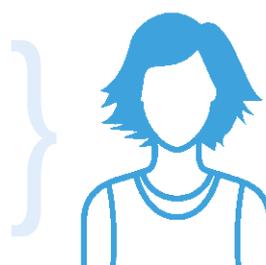
Where no author has made a dominant contribution there are a range of possibilities which aim at fairness. None of them received an overwhelmingly positive response. The most popular solution is that all authors should be named as joint 'first' authors, although it is not clear how many publications currently facilitate such a joint listing. There was also a positive response to listing of author names alphabetically, which may be more common in practice. Very few liked the suggestion of assigning authorship randomly, such as by the toss of a coin.

Other solutions given by respondents to solving the authorship order question included, listing the writer of the original manuscript first; giving preference to the individual who first had the research idea; and team members who alternate being the first author.

Researchers do not believe that the relative seniority of authors should influence the order of an author list, however the experience of several survey respondents indicates that this does happen. A researcher in Romania reported that "academic positions generate the rank of co-authors".

"In my experience it is often women who are often left out or moved down the authorship order."

Editor, Humanities, Australia





Listing authors when all have made an equal contribution

Importance for determining the order of names in a co-authored paper where no contributor has made a dominant contribution. Mean importance rating out of 10, from 1 (not important at all) to 10 (extremely important).

5.9 The authors should be named as joint first authors
5.4 Names of contributors should be listed alphabetically
4.0 The first named author should be the person who needs a first authorship the most for career advancement
2.8 The first named author should be the most senior member of the research team
2.4 Authorship order should be determined randomly (e.g. through the toss of a coin)



"I've always organised my research projects so that we publish at least as many papers as there are team members. We then each take it in turn to be the first author, with the sequence of names changing to ensure fairness"

Editor, Education, UK

Agreeing on the authorship order

What process should a research group use to agree an authorship list? Regularly reviewing the authorship order, on the basis of relative levels of intellectual contribution, was a popular solution. There was also strong support for an opposite suggestion, that authorship order could be agreed between all members of a research team before the research begins.

This conflict of opinion highlights that HSS researchers do not have a settled view on how to come to an agreement. As a researcher in Australia explained, "This is hard to make rules about. It cannot be agreed in advance because it may change, and it can be hard to agree on levels of contribution."

The solution given by some respondents was that, whatever choice is made, a note should be included on how the authorship order was decided.



"Regardless of logic, the order should be negotiated to mutual satisfaction"

Editor, Education, USA



Determining authorship

Authorship scenario part 1: authors

Survey respondents were presented with a scenario and invited to respond according to their primary role in the publishing process; as an author, a reviewer or an editor. Authors were provided with the following description of the situation:

Prof. Smith, a full professor, and Dr. Jones, an assistant professor, design a research study and apply successfully for funding. Prof. Smith is the named principal investigator for the project and Dr. Jones is the named co-investigator. The funding enables them to employ Pat Neilson as a research assistant. Pat carries out data collection and analyses the data. At the request of Prof. Smith and Dr. Jones, Pat then drafts a paper for publication based on the results. Prof. Smith and Dr. Jones are impressed by Pat's work in analyzing the data and drafting the paper. They decide that it does not need to be revised for any important intellectual content and submit it to a journal to be considered for publication.

96% of respondents believe that Pat should receive an authorship credit

76% believe that Pat should be listed as the first author because of the research assistant's level of contribution.

74% think Prof. Smith deserves an authorship credit

67% would give Dr. Jones an authorship credit

26% agreed that "Pat is the only true author of the paper. Prof. Smith and Dr. Jones did not contribute sufficiently to be named as authors".

The second most common problem facing researchers of multi-authored papers is determining whether a colleague has contributed sufficiently to the paper to deserve an authorship credit.

What should qualify someone to be included as an author on a paper? Survey respondents believe that the following are all contributions which should result in an authorship credit, in an ideal world:

- Being responsible for the conception and design of a project
- Being responsible for the analysis and/or interpretation of data
- Drafting the paper or revising it critically for intellectual content

All of these criteria are elements of the Vancouver protocol definition of authorship, along with 'final approval of the version to be published', which was not scored so highly by respondents. Researchers do not think that it is particularly important whether someone is the research grant holder. The lowest rated condition was being a senior ranked member of the research team submitting a paper.

The reality gap

The survey has revealed that there is a gap between the ideal world and reality when it comes to deciding who should receive an authorship credit.

Being a senior ranked colleague would be unimportant to researchers for determining an authorship claim in an ideal world. However, in practice, while not of the greatest influence, it is regarded as being of importance. In the real world, greater importance is also afforded to being the supervisor of a doctoral student, the research grant holder, or giving final approval of the paper.

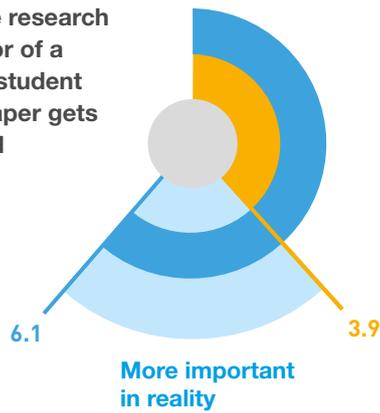
Those qualifications which scored most highly when respondents considered an ideal world are given a little less importance in practice.



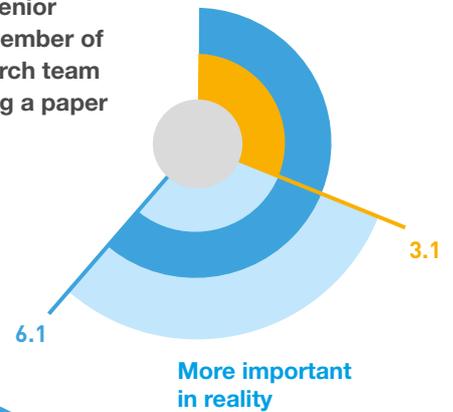
How important should be / are each of the following conditions in determining who is named as an author?

1 – Not at all important to 10 – Extremely Important

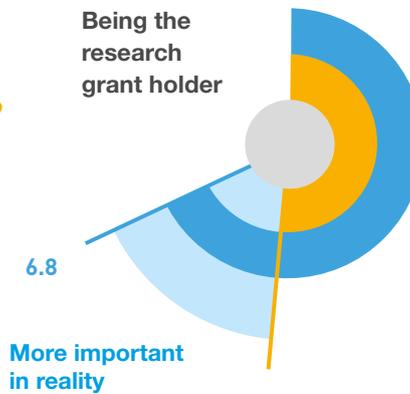
Being the research supervisor of a doctoral student whose paper gets published



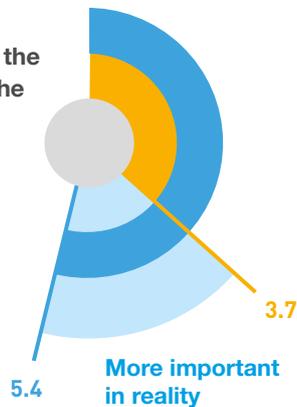
Being a senior ranked member of the research team submitting a paper



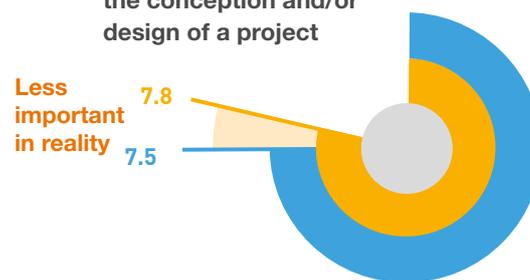
Being the research grant holder



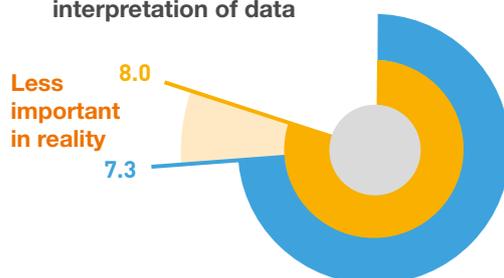
Giving final approval of the version of the paper to be published



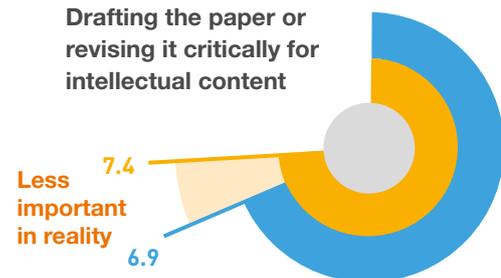
Being responsible for the conception and/or design of a project



Being responsible for the analysis and/or interpretation of data



Drafting the paper or revising it critically for intellectual content



Key

- Ideal world average
- Real world average



How common are problems of authorship credit?

Mean score out of 10, from 1 (not at all common) to 10 (extremely common).

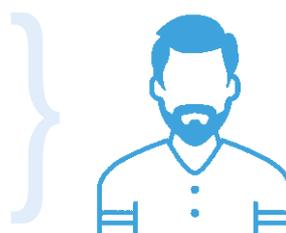


Does the reality gap mean that some people are being credited as authors when they have made no contribution? And are deserving colleagues going uncredited? The former, sometimes known as ‘gift authorship’, occurs more frequently than ‘ghost authorship’, when the real author is missed off the list, but neither of these is a very common occurrence in the view of HSS researchers.

However, there is support for the opinion that senior academics are sometimes over-credited. There is a suggestion that although senior colleagues may provide support to their juniors, as their role requires, this contribution may not always be significant enough to warrant an authorship credit. A humanities researcher in the UK complained about, “Supervisors insisting their name goes on as a co-author when they’ve basically done their job, nothing more”.

“Deans and departments chairs often ask to preview your manuscript and it comes back to you with their names attached as co-authors.”

Editor, Library & Information Science, USA



Other notable problems of co-authorship

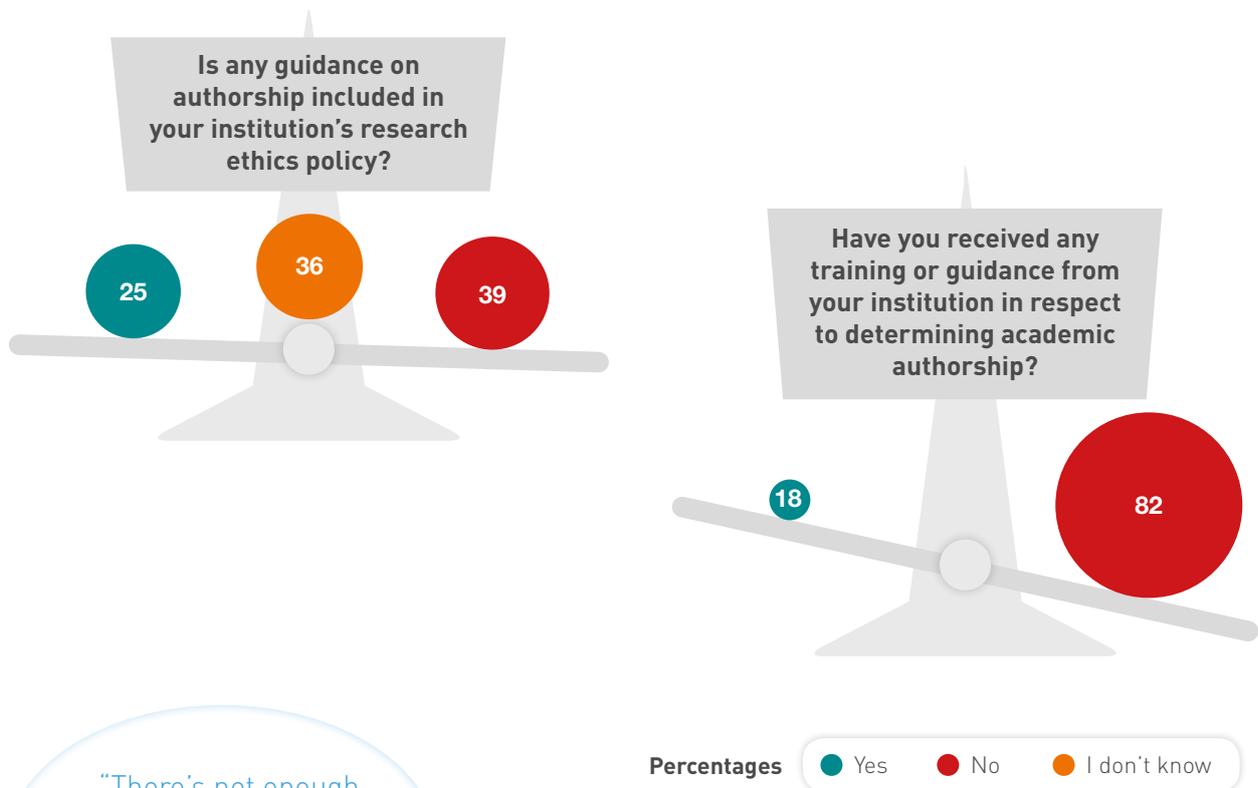
There is a long tail of other problems noted by researchers which may reflect individual situations. Of note amongst these were those relating to the process of writing collaboratively. A humanities researcher in Norway has come up against different preferences for style, writing habits, and working schedules. Others commented on the effect of a diffusion of responsibility which an Arts editor in the UK described as “no-one taking proper oversight”.



5 Training and Guidance

One of the most significant findings of this survey is that, at the institutional level, there is an opportunity for much more help to be provided to tackle the challenges of co-authorship.

Only 18% of researchers have ever received training or guidance from their institution on academic authorship. Perhaps because of this lack of training, 36% of researchers are not aware whether authorship is addressed in the research ethics policy of their institution. Only 25% of researchers reported that their institution definitely has a policy on these issues.



“There’s not enough support on how to do collaborative writing”
Editor, Education, Canada

“There is a lack of institutional support for co-authored work in funding or promotion”
Reviewer, Humanities, USA



6 The role of journals, editors and reviewers

As well as the need for greater training and guidance from institutions, might there also be a role for co-authorship support at the journal level? For example, could journals, editors and reviewers have a role in promoting best practice for authorship attribution?

Authorship scenario part 2: editors and reviewers

Survey respondents were presented with a scenario and invited to respond according to their primary role in the publishing process; as an author, a reviewer or an editor.

Reviewers and editors were invited to respond to the following acknowledgement attached to a paper they were considering for publication:

“In this study we would like to acknowledge the work of our research assistant, Pat Neilson, who collected and analysed the data and drafted the paper for publication.”

Reviewer responses:

69% would recommend to the journal's editor that Pat should be named as one of the article's authors.

19% would suggest that the research assistant should be named as the first author.

12% of reviewers believe that this acknowledgement currently gives sufficient recognition to Pat

Editors were asked how they would respond if they received concerns about the authorship from a reviewer:

68% would ask for the authorship list to be amended to include the research assistant.

21% would request Pat to be listed as the first author.

19% believe that determination of authorship is a private matter that is up to the contributors to decide how this is allocated between them.

The responses to the scenario above suggest that most editors and reviewers would be prepared to intervene if they believed that a contribution to a researcher article had not been properly credited.



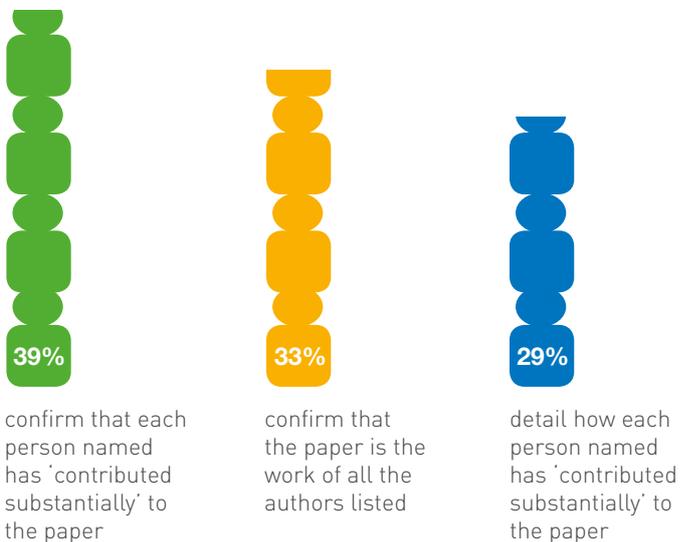
Journal policies

Could the policies of HSS journals also play a role in ensuring that only those whose contribution justifies it are listed as authors? Some publications are already requiring authors to define their level of contribution, such as using the CASRAI Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT¹).

The survey included some suggested solutions which could be adopted by journals, designed to give confidence that all authors listed were included on merit. However, none of these received majority support.

Which one of the following policies would you favour being adopted by journals when co-authored papers are submitted?

Corresponding author asked to...



A common response to these suggested solutions was that they would not have the desired effect. They would all rely on the corresponding author being truthful and, as a few respondents mentioned, it may be difficult for a junior researcher to suggest that a senior colleague has not made a substantial contribution. Some suggested that each author should be asked to make a personal declaration. Others questioned whether this was an issue that ought to be tackled by journal editors or publishers.

“The co-authors should detail their respective contributions in a footnote at the start of the paper”

Editor, Arts, Ireland



¹http://dictionary.casrai.org/Contributor_Roles



7 Conclusion

The current situation

The finding of this report that co-authorship is increasingly common in the humanities and social sciences means that the associated practical and ethical questions can no longer be left to colleagues in science and medicine to tackle alone.

Most HSS researchers are not currently receiving guidance on these issues and the results of this survey indicate that this is leading to a situation of confusion and dissatisfaction.

Confusion

There is confusion about who should be credited as an author and in what order names should be listed. The survey results suggest that there is currently a range of approaches to solving these issues. For example, there is no clear majority in favor of any of the possible solutions for listing a group of authors who have made an equal contribution.

The variety of opinions expressed in the survey may be partly due to current practice differing between fields of study within HSS. In a recent webinar¹ Deborah Poff, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Academic Ethics*, contrasted the humanities, in which it is regarded as unethical for a supervisor be listed as an author on a student's paper, with the social sciences, where a student is often the first author and their supervisor is included later in the list. Further work on this co-authorship survey data may reveal results that echo that opinion.

¹ 'Standards in Authorship webinar summary', COPE, 2017 (<https://publicationethics.org/news/standards-authorship-webinar-summary>)

Dissatisfaction

There is also dissatisfaction with current practice. The 'reality gap' highlighted in this report indicates that authorship is not being determined in the way that HSS researchers would like it to be in an ideal world. Respondents made it clear that they are unhappy that senior academics tend to be over-credited and that junior ranked academics are under-credited for the work that they do. Should practice be brought into line with the ideal?

Shaping the future

Whose role is it to end this confusion and dissatisfaction? This report raises questions for several groups.

Institutions

Currently only a minority of researchers report that their institution provides guidance on authorship issues and even fewer have received training on how to deal with them. Institutions that do not currently have authorship policies need to create them and those that do need to be better at disseminating them. There are now thriving researcher development programs in higher education institutions around the world and we hope that this report will encourage authorship guidance to be a greater element of that training.

Journals and Publishers

While it may not be the role of publishers or individual journals to police authorship, it is not uncommon for a journal's instructions for authors to outline the ethical standards expected in a range of areas. Could publishers develop new policies and processes to improve the situation?

Opinion was fairly split on what measures researchers favor journals adopting to make authorship decisions more transparent. There were also concerns that any additional requirements might only add to the administrative burden on authors, without solving the problems. Publishers might however consider whether they can also play a role in filling the guidance gap, using websites, workshops, and social media to communicate the latest advice on authorship standards.

The survey also found that most journal editors and reviewers are prepared to intervene if they believe that authorship of a paper has been misattributed. It is unlikely that monitoring these issues could become a routine part of their role but publishers should ensure that editors and reviewers are properly supported when they do encounter them.



Societies

Scholarly societies may wish to consider whether they need to take a more active role in defining and encouraging best practice in their field. There are already some HSS bodies who do provide authorship guidelines, such as the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics¹ and the American Psychological Association Code of Conduct², but many others appear to be largely silent on the issue. The growth of interdisciplinary studies also presents societies with the opportunity to work together to harmonize approaches across HSS.

¹ *Code of Ethics and Policies and Procedures of the ASA Committee on Professional Ethics*, ASA, 1999 (www.asanet.org)

² *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*, APA, 2017 (www.apa.org/ethics/code)

Authors

The problems that can arise from co-authorship may not have been considered by all authors, especially if they are at the beginning of their career. We therefore hope that this report will help them to go into the process with their eyes open. Agreeing early how authorship attribution is to be decided, at the point when researchers first begin collaborative projects, may help to prevent disputes or dissatisfaction from ever arising.

Peer review: a global view

A white paper from Taylor & Francis

What do researchers really think about the process of peer review, its timeframes and the realities of submission? How is the daily experience matching to expectations across disciplines? Do researchers still continue to value peer review, and how comfortable (or not) are they with different peer review models?

In 2015 we published one of the largest research studies into peer review in recent years, gathering opinions on peer review from those who author research articles, those who review them, and the journal editors who oversee the process.

Download the white paper at: <http://bit.ly/tfPeerReview>



ALSO AVAILABLE



Motivations, training and support in peer review

A supplement to the peer review whitepaper includes the following key findings:

- Making a contribution to the field and sharing results are the strongest motivations for submitting to peer-reviewed journals.
- Most people received their first invitation to review through the journal editor or an editorial board member.
- Over two thirds of authors who have never peer reviewed would like to.
- 64% of authors in HSS and 63% in STM who are yet to review a paper would like formal training.
- Playing their part as a member of the academic community, reciprocating the benefit, and improving papers are the most important reasons for agreeing to peer review in both science, technology and medicine (STM) and humanities and social sciences (HSS) disciplines.

Download the supplement at: <http://bit.ly/PeerReviewMotivations>



8 Survey demographics

Below is an outline of survey respondent demographics.

The largest group of respondents have experience of all three roles: author, reviewer, and editor. Editors have also authored and reviewed significantly more articles than the other respondents. Within this editor group men outnumber women and respondents tend to be older than in the other categories.

Researchers based in Europe and North America make up the majority of respondents. Only in the Reviewer category are European researchers outnumbered by those from the USA and Canada.

	Author	Author & Reviewer	Author, Reviewer & Editor
Please select the role (author etc.) which best describes you best	7%	33%	60%
Mean number of papers published	9.5	23	72
Mean number of papers reviewed	N/A	24	164
Median first year of editorship	N/A	N/A	2008
Gender			
Male	46%	54%	60%
Female	54%	44%	39%
Prefer not to say	0%	1%	1%
Other	0%	0.8%	0.2%
Age			
20 – 29	13%	3%	0.5%
30 – 39	33%	36%	10%
40 – 49	35%	33%	22%
50 – 59	17%	14%	32%
60 – 69	2%	11%	24%
70 or over	0%	3%	10%
Region			
Africa & Middle East	2%	8%	7%
Australasia	12%	7%	12%
Europe	37%	35%	37%
Latin America	2%	3%	3%
South & South East Asia	8%	7%	6%
USA & Canada	31%	39%	33%
Country unknown	10%	1%	3%



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