



Authorship practices in Asian cultures

by Joselita T. Salita

Introduction

I believe my experience of authorship practices in the marine biology field may also be relevant to the biomedical sciences. The ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon is so widespread in academia that issues of authorship and related malpractices seem likely to be universal.

Who deserves authorship?

During my time as a research assistant in a Philippine university, any ‘substantial intellectual contribution’ justified authorship, despite the vagueness of the phrase. The International Council of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) began drafting their 1985 authorship guidelines in 1978, and they were adopted by the Council of Scientific Editors (CSE) in 1999 [1]. However, these guidelines were not discussed in our research group, and Bhopal and co-workers (1997) reported that the vast majority of British medical scientists remained unaware of them [2].

The current (2008) ICMJE guidelines give three authorship criteria, all of which must be met: 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published [3]. The guidelines are very strict and many believe that researchers should work with editors to redefine authorship criteria [2]. Some journals have therefore developed systems to increase transparency of contributorship. In practice, authorship is still usually based on a common understanding among co-authors. Although the ICMJE guidelines state that acquiring funds, collecting data and generally supervising research are not enough to merit authorship [3], the fact that the criteria are not measurable is the weakness of these guidelines. This also leads to problems with ordering authors’ names on the byline. Laboratory heads are usually responsible for the conception and design of big research schemes so they almost always meet criterion number one. They also revise the paper critically for *important* intellectual content and approve the final version of the manuscript. As a result, authorship practices in the Philippines have not changed compared with 15 years ago.

Authorship malpractices

Lafin and co-workers summarise the categories of authorship malpractices defined by ICMJE [4]. Gift and guest authorships fall under the category of honorary authorship, which are not honourable at all. If an author does not

meet the ICMJE criteria, then authorship is misattributed and therefore, ‘honorary’. The difference between gift and guest authorship has more to do with the position of the receiving author. Guest authors are usually experts in the field whose names increase the chances that the paper will be published in a prestigious journal. Gift authors do not contribute to the writing or research itself but for numerous reasons are given the ‘gift’. Ghost authors are those whose names do not appear on the byline. In the medical field, they are typically thought of as medical writers and statisticians who are often funded by pharmaceutical companies as detailed in other articles in this issue. For this article, I refer to students or research assistants, who have been involved in major stages of the research but are denied authorship.

Shapiro and co-workers showed that gift authorship is widely practised so that 20 to 50% of authors do not meet the criteria set by ICMJE [5]. A survey in the *Lancet* also showed that 32% of scientists are willing to gift authorship to increase their paper’s chances of publication or boost their careers [4]. Authorship may also be gifted for reasons of mutual support or friendship [6], reciprocities in the case of collaborative investigations [4, 7], coercion by senior investigators (otherwise known as ‘White Bull’ effect [8]), prevention of conflicts [9] and motivating students in research [7, 10].

Scenarios of authorship in Asia

Ganatra (1996) reported that authorship rules in India follow the convention of the institute and had not changed in 40 years [11]. According to him, the person who wrote the paper and did most of the work (usually the research assistant) may be the first author and may present the paper at local conferences. At national conferences, the laboratory head is first author and presents the work, and at international conferences, the institute head becomes first author and presenter. Kakkar (2004) mentioned the strong practice of gift authorship in India and ignorance of the ICMJE guidelines [12].

A Japanese scientist told me that in Japan, the laboratory head gets automatic senior authorship as the ‘source of research ideas’. We subsequently realised that our definitions of a ‘senior author’ differed. For me, the ‘senior author’ makes a major contribution to the paper and is therefore listed first, which is the conventional definition [13]. For the Japanese scientist, however, the senior author is always the laboratory head and his name appears last on

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the list. It was not clear whether the last position is a special position such as in other societies [4].

An ex-colleague from Indonesia related that laboratory heads also get automatic co-authorship. Sometimes, institute heads get authorships just for their titles. The amount contributed by each author is not necessarily reflected in their order on the byline but the person who prepares the paper is always the senior author and the laboratory head follows automatically.

In the Philippine institute, where I started my career, laboratory technicians never manage to become authors, by virtue of ‘substantial intellectual contribution’, but laboratory heads or thesis advisors always do. If the laboratory head writes the paper, he gets sole authorship although the research assistant runs the experiments (and may have independently modified the experiments), does and interprets the statistical tests and researches the literature. These contributions may not be substantial enough for co-authorship and may not even be mentioned in the acknowledgments. However, if the research assistant writes the whole paper, the laboratory head is always automatically a co-author. The laboratory head, as the *source* of the main project ideas is always considered to make a *substantial* contribution to the paper’s theme no matter how specific the paper’s topic is. In established research groups, where research assistants also contribute to formulating new project goals, it is often difficult to trace the source of the original idea. And in spite of increased participation of research assistants at the conception stage, and consequent decreased intellectual contribution of the laboratory head, the latter is still recognised as a co-author. When graduate and post-graduate students have their theses published, they also co-author their papers with their advisors even if the advisor’s contribution is mainly editing the draft. Although theses are independently conceived, done and written by students, the fact that the experiments are performed within the frame of the advisor’s project, and that the advisor provides guidance, which may entail an intellectual contribution, this ends up in co-authorship in the resulting publication.

After discussions with eight Asian scientists, I realised that gifting authorship to laboratory heads is not a condemned practice in Asia. Givers find it normal, and this attitude may be difficult to change because it is imbedded in the four Asian values discussed below.

Courtesy to or respect for authority. Courtesy is a deeply rooted Asian value. Laboratory heads are seen as having worked their way into a position to be respected, and there is general acceptance of authority figures. Bhatia and co-workers relate gift authorship in India to ‘guru-shishya parampara’, a teacher–disciple relationship [14].

Gratitude or indebtedness. Students or research assistants feel indebted to their superiors for choosing them, rather than believing that they achieved their position through

their own merits. Humility is a virtue in Buddhist Japan, Catholic Philippines and Muslim Indonesia. Moreover, in the Philippines, the value of indebtedness (‘utang na loob’) goes beyond gratitude [15], and cannot be reciprocated, necessitating lifelong efforts to return the favour [15].

Diplomatic gesture or bribery. Even those whose careers have started to progress gift authorship to their immediate boss, as a diplomatic gesture or bribe, to ensure that they maintain their position, or to gain support for future activities or strong recommendation letters. If collaboration with other institutes or countries is involved the gifting is called a *diplomatic* act. Although collaborative research is likely to be limited to perhaps 4 people, papers may end up with more than 10 authors including immediate bosses and sometimes institute directors from both countries. This ensures that there are ‘real products’ from such undertakings and encourages future activities. It is also done in the West as it ‘encourages sharing of ideas’ [10].

Social pressure and harmonious relationships. In Asia, it is plainly difficult not to practice gift authorship because of social pressures. Superiors can make academic life difficult or impossible. Bhatia and co-workers mention possible academic penalties and team conflicts in India if traditional authorship practices are not followed [14]. Further, Asians act collectively. In many Asian cultures, the value system favours the group: for example, the family, neighbourhood, or community. Laboratory heads gain financial support for their laboratories based on numbers of publications but teaching and administrative tasks often make it difficult for them to publish. The support of the laboratory team enhances their research reputation. The research assistant follows this trend, contributing to the common goal and becoming a valued group member. Filipinos call this ‘pakikisama’ [16], and many gift authorship even when working in the West.

What is unethical about gifting authorship?

For those receiving it, the question is easily answered. It is accepting undeserved reward and, as Bagioli pointed out, it could be seen as ‘libel to nature’ [1]. For those giving it, it may depend on the reasons. If it is done to get something in return, it is a clear act of corruption but if the reason is to give due respect and gratitude to your superior or for attainment of the common good, is it still unethical? I believe it is because, as McKneally says, the values at the root of science and its publications are truthfulness, trustworthiness and fairness [13]. If these values are not maintained, science is corrupted. In science, everyone is a student, for science is the continuous pursuit of knowledge. The usual student–professor, assistant–laboratory head relationships must be challenged and the practice of bowing to authority must be ended. Like all exercises for the pursuit of truth, authority is recognised only if fairness is practised. Gifting authorship can lead to abuse such as parasitism and misconduct in the scientific world [8].

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> Consequences of non-deserving authorship

Authorship criteria must be adhered to so that editors can find appropriate peer reviewers. 'Frequent gift authorship can make someone with little knowledge of a subject appear to be an expert, and lead to them being inappropriately invited to review' [17]. We rely on scientific publications to maintain the integrity of the peer-review process, and this demands an honest merit-based system of authorship.

Authorship brings responsibility as well as intellectual credit. Inappropriate authorship can be embarrassing and have potentially detrimental career consequences. Well-known examples include the case of John Darsee, who in the 80s falsified data and had department heads from Harvard and Emory universities as co-authors [6, 7]. Similarly, Slutsky from the University of California in San Diego and Hwang of the University of Pittsburgh fabricated data and took with them unknowing co-authors [7].

The 'generosity' of gifting authorship can also be disadvantageous for young scientists. A Filipino friend of mine kept practising this even in his post-doctoral days, until he was wrongly assessed as not being independent enough to carry out a research project.

Denial of authorship

More serious is the practice of denying credits to those who really generated the papers. Biagioli considers this a type of plagiarism [1]. Although ICMJE put much effort into protecting the integrity of authorship to make it easier for editors to find reviewers, abuse of students and assistants through denial of authorship continues.

In the West the names of deserving assistants and post-doctoral fellows are often omitted from papers [18]. Some countries have agencies that handle complaints on such authorship malpractices [8]. Some universities, such as Stanford and Johns Hopkins, have offices of postdoctoral affairs and some institutions have an ombudsman to handle such grievances [18]. In many institutions, however, the victims move to 'a better job', rather than go through this process [18]. This type of ghost authorship is most likely to continue in Asia, where disputes are more often avoided than settled.

The future

Authorship malpractices can be a vicious cycle. Younger scientists may in turn practise authorship abuse when their time comes; the abused becoming abusers. For example, Laffin and co-workers cited a study showing that 75% of scientists who had experienced authorship abuse were willing to list undeserving authors [4].

Systems of transparency are being worked out and implemented in order to lessen if not eradicate abuses in authorship practices [1, 3, 4, 6, 19]. Perhaps these will be successful and will also reach Asia. It may not be easy to change the value systems but an increased maturity and

understanding of the responsibilities of a scientist to society may be an initial step. Bhatia and co-workers suggest that training and continued education in ethical concerns should be part of science programs at the undergraduate level [14].

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Joselita T. Salita

Bremen, Germany
jtsalita@aol.de

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