

## Who is innocent in authorship misconduct?

Recently, the editorial office received a requisition from one of the co-corresponding authors of an article published in *Zoological Research* in 2003. This researcher claimed he was not informed that he was listed as an author during the entire manuscript submission and publication process. Moreover, he had a concern about the reliability of the data in the paper. Therefore, he would like to withdraw his authorship of this particular article or withdraw this article entirely. The editorial office forwarded the letter to the other authors to collect comments, and the first author completely denied the co-corresponding author's claim of unawareness of authorship by providing archived emails between them. Setting aside what really happened 13 years ago, in this case, it may be interpreted that either this cocorresponding author himself is announcing his honorary authorship (either by passively being added to the byline or actively accepting the offer) in this article, or is trying to avoid taking (potential) responsibility regarding the research content by using honorary authorship as a defense. Meanwhile, the first author has been accused of offering honorary authorship to a senior researcher.

In scientific writing, the debate regarding authorship, including the definition, eligibility, and order of authorship or contributor, as well as honorary authorship (also called guest or gift authorship) and ghost authorship never stops (Kornhaber et al., 2015; Stretton, 2014; Vinther & Rosenberg, 2012), especially as multidisciplinary cooperation has become increasingly common in almost every aspect of scientific study and in the rush for publication glory. To help researchers define authorship, guidelines written by international organizations are available and are continuously undergoing amendment. For example, of the most commonly accepted authorship measures, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) states that an author needs to meet all four of the following criteria: (1) substantial contributions to: the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data; (2) drafting or critically revising the work for important intellectual content; (3) final approval of the version to be published; (4) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work to ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the research are appropriately investigated and resolved (ICMJE, 2013). Contributors who meet fewer than all four of the above criteria should not be listed as authors, but should be acknowledged. It also states that "examples of activities that alone (without other contributions) do not qualify a contributor for authorship are acquisition of funding; general supervision of a research group or general administrative support; and writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading" (ICMJE, 2013).

In addition to guidelines such as those mentioned above,

many journals also ask each author listed in the byline or acknowledgements to provide a statement that entails the specific contributions and roles every person played. These measures seem comprehensive and should prevent authorial misconduct; however, the actual situation is not as transparent as it should be. Nowadays, the quality of a researcher's publications has become critical in performance evaluation, funding application, and career promotion, to name a few. It is not rare for junior or lower ranked researchers to offer guest authorships to senior researchers or heads of department to either increase the chance of submission acceptance or to obtain certain benefits in resource allocation (Du & Tang, 2013; Kressel & Dixon, 2011). Some researchers may even exchange authorships to multiply publications.

Many anonymous surveys have been conducted regarding unethical or breached authorship, and it is not surprising that authorship violation is a global phenomenon, found within a large number of publications, no matter how high the impact factor nor what language they are published in (Wislar et al., 2011). One reason authorship misconduct is hard to eliminate is that such behaviors are extremely difficult to define. When someone's name is listed in the byline for certain reasons, what good are authorship guidelines, statements or questionnaires? For example, in some academic publication withdrawals, such as the large-scale article withdrawal of Biomed Central articles in 2014 (<http://retractionwatch.com>), some authors immediately claimed honorary authorship. Nevertheless, if these articles were not involved in the scandal, would those authors continue to enjoy the "honor" from honorary authorship? In regards to the particular article I mentioned at the beginning concerning disputed authorship, who is innocent and who is the victim, I'm afraid I cannot tell.

When a young researcher begins his/her scientific training, the first thing to learn is academic ethics and the fundamentals of scientific spirit. Proper authorship embodies honesty, integrity, fairness and transparency, which surely are the very essence of any scientific pursuit. To avoid authorial misconduct, besides explicit instructions, detailed questionnaires, and strengthened surveillance measures, our awareness of what is ethical is the decisive element. If authorship is a test, I hope every researcher can pass. Being an author of a paper, we share the glory, but we must also share the consequences.

Suqing Liu

Editorial Director  
Kunming Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences  
Kunming 650223, China

## REFERENCES

- Du J, Tang XL. 2013. Perceptions of author order versus contribution among researchers with different professional ranks and the potential of harmonic counts for encouraging ethical co-authorship practices. *Scientometrics*, **96**(1): 277-295.
- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. 2013(2013-08-01)[2016-05-13]. Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors. <http://www.icmje.org>.
- Kornhaber RA, McLean LM, Baber RJ. 2015. Ongoing ethical issues concerning authorship in biomedical journals: and integrative review. *International Journal of Nanomedicine*, **10**: 4837-4846.
- Kressel HY, Dixon AK. 2011. Where is the honor in honorary authorship?. *Radiology*, **259**(2): 324-327.
- Retractionwatch. 2016[2016-05-10]. BioMed Central retracting 43 papers for fake peer review. <http://retractionwatch.com>.
- Stretton S. 2014. Systematic review on the primary and secondary reporting of the prevalence of ghostwriting in the medical literature. *BMJ Open*, **4**(7): e004777.
- Vinther S, Rosenberg J. 2012. Appearance of ghost and gift authors in Ugeskrift for Laeger and Danish Medical Journal. *Danish Medical Journal*, **59**(5): A4455.
- Wislar JS, Flanagan A, Fontanarosa PB, DeAngelis CD. 2011. Honorary and ghost authorship in high impact biomedical journals: a cross sectional survey. *BMJ*, **343**: d6128.