Figuring out the “who” and the “where” of authorship

Authorship is often referred to as the currency of academia. It plays a significant role in how one advances in his or her academic career, such as getting a job, a grant, tenure, promotion, even in attracting doctoral-stream students. While it is evident that authorship has its privileges, it also comes with responsibilities and expectations.

In their 2015 Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy (CJOT) editorial, Davis and Polatajko explained that to earn authorship, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) established four criteria: (a) one must have made “substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work”; (b) one must have drafted or critically revised the work for important intellectual content; (c) one must have approved the final version of the work to be published; and (d) one must agree “to be accountable for all aspects of the work” when it comes to its accuracy and integrity, and be able to identify who is responsible for each part (ICMJE, n.d., Section 2). One must meet all four of these criteria to earn the privilege of authorship. If none or only some of the criteria are met, then one’s contribution should be delineated in the Acknowledgement section. The ICMJE also stipulates that anyone who meets the first criterion should be provided with the opportunity to meet the other three criteria.

Despite the development of the ICMJE and other guidelines for authorship, issues with authorship continue to exist. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, 2014) reports that the most common issues are (a) persons who have been omitted from authorship claiming they deserve authorship, (b) persons who have been named as authors without their consent, (c) persons who agree to be authors but do not assume responsibility when something goes wrong, and (d) confusion when it comes to having multiple authors. Writing a manuscript can be complex and can involve the contribution of people in different roles. The number of researchers collaborating on projects is increasing, as, consequently, is the number of researchers coauthoring. The question as to whether a particular researcher can be an author is not usually a point of discussion; however, whether he or she has contributed sufficiently to merit authorship is a recurring issue. In addition, different types of authors and coauthors can be involved in the writing of a manuscript, each with its unique intricacies to consider. Some common instances of authorship collaborations are outlined below as well as what contributions should, and should not, constitute authorship.

“Who” Can Be an Author

Research assistant. Research assistants are often the “doers” of a research project. They are paid to “do.” Their inclusion as coauthors is often in question because they are paid. However, authorship decisions should not be influenced by whether a salary is involved or not. The decision as to whether a research assistant should be credited as a coauthor is based on whether the individual has made a creative or intellectual contribution to the work. If the research assistant simply did what she or he was told to do (whether it is coordinating recruitment, collecting data, performing data analysis, or whatever), then he or she probably does not merit coauthorship.

Practitioners. With the advent of evidence-based practice, practitioners are encouraged not only to refer to the research literature to guide their practice but also to become actively
involved in research. Thus, it stands to reason that one might ask what type of practitioner involvement merits authorship. As in all authorship decisions, the answer lies in determining if the contribution made to the research project warrants authorship. For instance, the recruitment of participants does not justify authorship, while intellectual contributions at different points in the research process, such as the elaboration of the research question or protocol, or the interpretation of findings, are contributions that can justify a coauthorship.

**Students.** Authorship is not a trivial matter for students as it can play a significant role in a student’s ability to secure scholarships, research funding, and acceptance into a graduate program (Fine & Kurdek, 1993). Research publication is the primary focus for students doing master’s or doctoral thesis work. Usually, these students will be the first author of the research publication as they are the person most involved with the work and responsible for preparing the drafts of the manuscript. Students can also become actively involved in research when they decide to undertake a research internship or as a requirement for a professional degree. In these cases, the students do not always meet the requirements for a first-author position but may merit coauthorship. Thus, if a student’s contribution is not simply technical, his or her creative and intellectual contributions must be recognized with the offer of authorship (Fine & Kurdek, 1993).

One matter that complicates the coauthorship of students is the nature of the faculty–student relationship (Fine & Kurdek, 1993). Unlike the collaboration between two professionals, the collaboration between student and supervisor involves a power dynamic. Not only do supervisors evaluate their student’s work, they also provide letters of recommendations and can potentially offer a variety of opportunities to help their student. Therefore, it is important for the supervisor to discuss how authorship decisions are made and specify what tasks and types of contributions are required to obtain authorship (Bourbonnière, Russell, & Goldsmith, 2006; Fine & Kurdek, 1993).

**Noncontributing authors.** Practices such as gift, honorary, or guest authorship (where people are named as authors when they did not actually contribute to the manuscript to the extent described above) complicate the issue of authorship (Smith & Williams-Jones, 2012). This practice is thought to be part of the reason for the overinflation of the number of authors in biomedical journals and is discouraged by most journals (Bavdekar, 2012), including *CJO*.*T*. There are different reasons for giving guest authorship, for instance, it may be a standard practice to include the head of a lab on all publications from that lab, to repay a favour, or because including the name is thought to improve the chances for publication. Yet another approach to authorship is where an individual participates in the research and/or writing up of the paper but is not named as an author or in the acknowledgements; this approach is referred to as ghost authorship. This term also serves to describe technical writers, when a third party, not involved in the research, is hired to write the first draft or edit it to save the researchers time or improve the quality of the manuscript (Bavdekar, 2012, Bennett & Taylor, 2003). Clearly, these individuals do not meet the ICMJE criteria and should not be identified as authors and should, at most, be listed in the acknowledgements. The understanding is that authors of a manuscript were actively involved in the writing and take responsibility for its content. As such, the practice of providing authorship to noncontributing authors essentially deceives the public for it is impossible to determine whether listed authors are aware of the document’s content (Bavdekar, 2012, Bennett & Taylor, 2003).

**Authorship Order: The “Where”**

Once the question of “who” has been decided, the ensuing important decision is “where” each author’s name will appear in the list. In some fields, such as mathematics or finance (Waltman, 2012), alphabetical ordering is the norm and unrelated to author contribution; more commonly, author order is particularly important as it acts as a code that conveys the weight of the contribution made by that author, with the first author position indicating the highest contribution. However, the conventions used are often particular to the academic domain. For some researchers, the last author position is reserved for the senior researcher and alphabetical ordering may often be interpreted as signifying equal contribution. An agreement regarding decisions around the order of authorship should be made a priori. Authorship order can be determined in order of contribution, with the first author having made the greatest or most important contribution (Wager, 2009). However, authorship may also be attributed based on responsibilities or roles. For instance, the first author position is reserved typically for the person who was most involved with the work and, oftentimes, was responsible for preparing the first draft of the manuscript (Newman & Jones, 2006), while the last author is reserved for the senior researcher or principal investigator in acknowledgement of his or her leadership (Smith & Williams-Jones, 2012). There is also the identification of the “corresponding author” to discuss, which is usually attributed to the first or last author but not necessarily.

**Avoiding Authorship Problems**

So, what is the key to avoiding authorship problems? Communication, communication, communication! It is a good idea to discuss ICMJE guidelines for authorship, so as to make clear the expected level and type of contribution that would be considered sufficient for authorship. For instance, the ICMJE guidelines indicate that simply the acquisition of funding or the general supervision of the research group is not sufficient for authorship (Smith & Williams-Jones, 2012). This conversation should occur not only at the beginning of collaborations but throughout the research and writing process as roles can change, making it important to ensure that expectations are outlined and reviewed throughout. Such discussions foster open communication among colleagues and may avoid, or at least reduce, conflict between researchers about appropriate authorship. They also ensure that each author can articulate his or her level and type of input because some journals are requiring that all authors
describe their contribution to the work submitted (Smith & Williams-Jones, 2012).

Regardless of the author role, COPE (2014) is quite clear that to be an author, an individual needs to meet each of the four stipulated ICMJE guidelines criteria. If a person’s contribution meets some of the ICMJE criteria, but not all, COPE stipulates that any form of contribution (be it obtaining grant money, technical writing, commenting on a draft, or generating ideas) should be listed in the Acknowledgement section. Even so, when one is acknowledged in a paper, it implies that he or she has agreed to be acknowledged and endorses the work; as such, COPE recommends that individuals who are acknowledged sign a declaration of agreement. To avoid authorship problems, COPE also recommends including all named authors on a paper in correspondence about the submitted paper to reduce the possibility that individuals have been included without their consent. Remember, the authorship of an article must reflect the actual contributions to the work submitted and published. Authorship is not an entitlement but a responsibility that should not be taken lightly.

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References


La paternité de l’œuvre : Déterminer les auteurs et l’ordre de citation des auteurs

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La paternité d’une œuvre est souvent considérée comme la monnaie du milieu universitaire. Elle joue un rôle déterminant dans la progression de la carrière universitaire d’une personne, quand il s’agit, par exemple, d’obtenir un emploi, une subvention, un poste, une promotion et même, d’attirer des étudiants au doctorat. Bien qu’il soit évident que la paternité d’une œuvre soit liée à des privilèges, elle comporte aussi son lot de responsabilités et d’attentes.

Dans leur éditorial publié en 2015 dans la Revue canadienne d’ergothérapie (RCE), Davis et Polatajko ont expliqué que pour déterminer la paternité d’une œuvre, l’International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) a établi quatre critères; ainsi, pour être considérée comme un auteur, une personne doit: a) avoir fait « une contribution importante à la conception ou à l’élaboration de l’œuvre; ou à l’acquisition, l’analyse ou l’interprétation des données requises pour réaliser les travaux »; b) avoir ébauché ou révisé de manière critique le contenu intellectuel important de l’œuvre; c) avoir approuvé la version finale de l’œuvre à être publiée; et d) « accepter la responsabilité de tous les aspects de