What About Author Order and Acknowledgments? Suggestions for Additional Criteria for Conceptual Research in Bioethics

Elise Smith & Renaud Boulanger

Université de Montréal

McMaster University

Available online: 26 Sep 2011

To cite this article: Elise Smith & Renaud Boulanger (2011): What About Author Order and Acknowledgments? Suggestions for Additional Criteria for Conceptual Research in Bioethics, The American Journal of Bioethics, 11:10, 24-26

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2011.603813
beyond ascriptions of authorship to building a field that is transparent, ethical, innovative, and productive.

REFERENCES


What About Author Order and Acknowledgments? Suggestions for Additional Criteria for Conceptual Research in Bioethics

**Elise Smith,** Université de Montréal

**Renaud Boulanger,** McMaster University

We commend Resnik and Master (2011) not only for bringing ethical problems to light in conceptual bioethics research but also for attempting to elaborate practical criteria for authorship. The stated goal of the authorship criteria they develop is to uphold the principles of fairness and accountability. While perspectives on the application of these principles are not univocal, the authors suggest that fairness is related to the recognition of people’s contributions, while accountability is the ability “to determine who is responsible” (17) for the manuscript. We agree with the authors that the attribution of authorship should be guided by these two principles. However, we are not convinced that their task-oriented guidelines can fully translate fairness and accountability into practice because they do not address the relative extent of every contribution to a manuscript. Resnik and Master’s guidelines would be strengthened by adding, we suggest, explicit recommendations with respect both to the order in which authors should be listed (making the level of contribution transparent) and the appropriate use of acknowledgments (highlighting contributions that are not substantial but noteworthy). Doing so would contribute to a better recognition of the credit due to each contributor, as well as to a more accurate allocation of responsibility.

Resnik and Master explain that authorship of conceptual publications should be granted on the basis of making a “substantial contribution” to at least two important tasks (identifying a topic, reviewing the literature, drafting the paper, etc.). The extent or degree of a person’s contribution relative to other co-authors is, however, not taken into consideration in the proposed guidelines. As they stand, there is no indication in the guidelines that authors could be differentiated according to their respective level of contribution—something that we believe undermines both fairness and accountability.


While both individuals contributed substantially to at least two of the important tasks, A’s contribution amounted to 30% of the overall project and B’s contribution amounted to the other 70%. If the order of authorship is not determined by relative contribution, both of the individuals might be perceived, unfairly, to have contributed the same amount. Because ordering authors is a practical necessity (someone needs to be named first), matters can become even more unfair. For example, if the names of the authors are simply put in alphabetical order, then individual A would likely receive more visibility and recognition, given that her name starts with the first letter of the alphabet. In fields where alphabetical order is still the norm (e.g., economics), individuals with last names starting with a letter toward the end of the alphabet are unfairly disadvantaged because they are seldom listed as first authors in collaborative publications. (Van Praag and Van Praag 2008) In the long term, these individuals might enjoy less recognition and success than an individual whose name starts with a letter near the beginning of the alphabet. As unlikely as this might appear, cases have even been reported of individuals changing their names in order to figure more prominently in academic publications. (Chambers, Boath, and Chambers 2001) To ensure fairness, authorship guidelines in bioethics should thus address authorship order. In many health science journals, there is already a tacit rule that authors be ranked in decreasing order of contribution (Smith and Williams-Jones 2011; Wager 2009). Although it is often complicated to determine the relative value of each individual’s contribution, this approach is more fair because it attempts to feature more prominently those individuals who have made more substantial contributions.

Ordering authors by relative contribution can also be justified on the grounds of accountability. Rennie and Flanagan (1994) have explained that authorship is like a coin that has two sides: credit and accountability. We believe that authors should be responsible (and thus accountable) in proportion to the contribution they make to a publication. The greater the recognition an author can get for a piece of work, the heavier the burden of accountability should be, and vice versa. This important link between accountability and credit is not established in Resnik and Master’s proposed guidelines. Of course, this is not to say that all authors should not have to stand by a paper they have co-authored. However, we are not certain that all “substantial contributions,” as defined by Resnik and Master, would allow co-authors to be in a position to “be able to determine who wrote [a] passage” (17) improperly cited or plagiarized and thus who is responsible for misconduct. Only those who have contributed the most to an article, i.e., were involved in most of the writing and revisions, would likely be in a position to keep track of such matters. While surely imperfect on several accounts, the approach of listing authors by relative contribution is in line with a recognized academic system of authorship recognition and can nurture fairness and accountability. Since this approach relies heavily on the possibility of ranking contributions between co-authors (i.e., A vs. B vs. C), deliberations between them become crucial.

A second shortcoming of Resnik and Master’s proposal is that it does not give recognition to those individuals who contribute in small but important ways to a manuscript. Discussions with colleagues can help an individual uncover areas that merit further work, review assumptions, test analytical findings, or address lacunas in writing. If Resnik and Master want to uphold a principle of fairness, we believe these nonsubstantial contributions ought to be highlighted. A recognized mechanism to acknowledge nonsubstantial contributions would also align with the concern Resnik and Master have already showed for students and research assistants, who often are asked to provide support in a way that may not warrant authorship.

Keeping track of small contributions could also help more justly share or attribute accountability. Imagine a horrible situation where authors of an article ask a colleague to comment on a piece of work in progress and the colleague recommends changes that amount to plagiarism, something the authors, in spite of their best efforts, could not detect. While due diligence is obviously always required, we believe there are cases of misconduct where it might be unjust to hold authors solely accountable. This is not to say that nonsubstantial contributors should be held fully accountable for the way that authors use their contributions; after all, it is the authors who are responsible for writing the paper and ensuring its validity and coherence. Nonetheless, nonsubstantial contributors should be held accountable for what they voluntarily contribute.

Unfortunately, there are for the most part no rules on how nonsubstantial contributions to manuscripts should be recognized. A simple step would be to standardize the use of acknowledgment sections in publications so that nonsubstantial contributions could be reported and recorded more systematically. At the moment, little consideration is given to this section, but with a more rigorous approach, the value (and responsibility) of being named in acknowledgments might increase over time, thereby leading to an increase both in fairness and accountability.

Empirical studies show that unethical authorship practices—including ghost authorship and gift authorship—are commonplace in academia. According to Martinson and colleagues, 10% of scientists admit having assigned authorship in violation of generally accepted practices in their respective disciplines (Martinson, Anderson, and De Vries 2005). Disclosure of one’s own unethical behavior is difficult and uncomfortable and thus it is highly likely that their occurrence (and thus the incidence) is significantly underreported (Antes and Mumford 2010). While there is a lack of empirical research on authorship practices in bioethics specifically, the interdisciplinary nature of the field means that authorship practices are likely to mirror those of other disciplines. Resnik and Master have initiated an important and timely discussion about the ethical attribution of authorship in bioethics publications, and that should be of interest to other disciplines. This discussion about principles of fairness and accountability is necessary to ensure the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) (Master 2011). However, we suggest that in order to effectively put into practice Resnik
and Master’s principles of fairness and accountability, authorship guidelines must address the issue of the relative extent of various contributions. To do so, we propose as a first step that standards be set regarding the order of authorship and the proper use of acknowledgments. More discussion is necessary, however, to find practical ways to efficiently implement these guidelines and so as to ensure fairness and accountability in bioethics scholarship.

REFERENCES

How Authorship Guidelines in Bioethics Can Ensure Fairness and Accountability
Barton Moffatt, Mississippi State University

Resnik and Master (2011) introduce an interesting topic that deserves further discussion in the bioethics community. Their proposal (that any two of five stated criteria need to be met to count as an author on a conceptual paper in bioethics) is a great starting point but needs further justification. First, they need to explain why they think that their list is exhaustive—it might be too limited to cover their intended targets. Second, they need to say more about why playing any two of the roles they identify is sufficient to meet their goal of ensuring fairness and accountability. The problem is that one criterion—number 5) drafting the manuscript and approving the final version—seems to be a necessary condition for counting as a conceptual author. Other combinations of two criteria, like (number 1) identifying a topic, (number 2) reviewing the literature, appear insufficient in the absence of any other contribution, especially a written contribution. It is also unclear why two different types of contribution are necessary as well. Making these justifications clear will advance the debate and help clarify who should count as an author on conceptual papers and why.

To count as an author on a conceptual paper, Resnik and Master (2011) argue that you need to contribute substantially in any two of the following five ways:

1. identifying a topic, problem, or issue to study;
2. reviewing and interpreting the relevant literature;
3. formulating, analyzing, and evaluating arguments that support one or more theses;
4. responding to objections and counterarguments; and
5. drafting the manuscript and approving the final version.

A conceptual paper reports on “research based on nonempirical methodologies used in many different fields in humanities” (Resnik and Masters 2011, 17). It is unclear whether Resnik and Master intend for this category to cover all humanities work in bioethics. If they do, they might consider expanding their list of qualifying types of contributions. It seems that humanities research that uses qualitative evidence is not necessarily well served by Resnik and Master’s criterion or existing scientific authorship criteria like the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (2011) standards. There is a good deal of significant work in bioethics that involves work in a journalistic or historical fashion that is not conceptual or empirical in the same sense as the biomedical sciences.

For example, consider work like the recent paper that revealed that the United States infected Guatemalan women with syphilis to test the efficacy of penicillin (Reverby 2011). If two people had worked on that project, one doing the archival research that uncovered the practice and one talking about the policy implications, it would be strange to deny authorship credit to the archival researcher because

Address correspondence to Barton Moffatt, Philosophy and Religion, Box JS, Mississippi State, MS 38762, USA. E-mail: brm157@msstate.edu

October, Volume 11, Number 10, 2011