Evolving norms: How team science affects authorship

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It is not the intention of this essay to question the value or necessity of coauthored research. Rather it proposes that consistent, systematic author-contribution disclosure will help document more empirically the actual value, necessity, and so forth, of coauthorship and collaboration. Journal policies that require disclosure of, for example, methods are not accused of questioning the value of the method—because it is understood that making clear the method helps other scholars better understand and assess a study’s procedures and results. As one longtime journal editor has observed, “Journals prescribe how to submit a manuscript, so why not prescribe correct authorship? (van Loon, 1997, p. 11).” And why not utilize author-contribution disclosure policy to develop data on JMCQ articles going forward, to more definitively analyze dynamics driving the increase in coauthored articles? Nothing is more fundamental to scholarship than presenting as transparent and accurate an account as possible of exactly how we do the work that we do.

Robert L. Kerr
University of Oklahoma

**Evolving Norms: How Team Science Affects Authorship**

Scientific endeavors, insights, and products may emerge from many different settings: from long-term individual research, from serendipity at a conference, and from organized (lab-based) group efforts, just to mention a few. How do these differences translate into authorship in final publication?

The observation has been made, in the JMCQ Forum and elsewhere, that the communication field is moving toward more “co-production” and less single-author pieces. This is the result of many converging developments: labs and research groups as organizing principles, grants enabling teams to work jointly on a topic, funding incentives in certain areas, bigger questions being addressed with more elaborate research designs, interdisciplinary pushes, and the specialization of, for example, data analysis and visualization of results. In this essay, I will address some of these developments, but first clearly state that it is important to have this dialogue and I welcome the JMCQ initiative to collect different experiences and perspectives to move the dialogue further. Second, let me declare myself in agreement with Kerr (in this Forum).
His call for transparency and fairness is legitimate and important. At the same time, it is also important to reflect on why we have this dialogue.

Let me comment on some of the factors that have led to the increase in multi-authored pieces in communication science.

One set of reasons stems from intellectual curiosity, serendipity, and the quest to address questions in a bigger perspective, for example, comparatively. Scholars have a long tradition of connecting in comparing phenomena across time or across countries. The comparative turn in communication science (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) has sparked both smaller and larger team projects with resultant publication lists. Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) seminal work is the result of comparative thinking, great scholarly synergy, and the combination of insights that collectively go beyond that of an individual. Taking three recent examples, we can see how such efforts have also allowed for the pooling of resources so that smaller ideas could be scaled up to large, comparative content analyses (e.g., de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2018), joint social media and survey data collection (e.g., Vaccari, Chadwick, & O’Loughlin, 2015), or running more elaborate experiments (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018).

A second set of reasons stems from the push toward interdisciplinary collaboration. To understand, for example, the current role, operations, and impact of platforms in the news sector, it makes a lot of sense to combine insights from communication science with that of data science, legal scholarship, public administration, and business. Manuscripts emerging from such projects will typically include multiple authors and be reflective of such team science.

A third set of reasons stems from universities’ or science foundations’ push toward focus on larger questions. This typically involves grant opportunities that will allow for one or more (senior) scholars to recruit a team of (more junior) scholars to work jointly on a project. The European Research Council (ERC) is pushing such team science with its flagship grant scheme (for junior, medior, and senior scholars) and publications reflect these efforts (e.g., Domahidi, Breuer, Kowert, Festl, & Qandt, 2016).

A fourth set of reasons stems what may be dubbed “professionalization.” Implicitly, we consider a well-rounded scholar one who is on top of the literature and is able to write a grant application, design a study, coordinate data collection, manage data, execute analyses, develop tables and figures, and write eloquently. Our toolbox in terms of, for example, data analysis is, however, expanding and becoming more specialized. Substantively our field is organizing it in smaller and more specialized subfields. This can lead to a sensible division of labor, where some team members take the lead in grant acquisitions, others in design, yet others in analysis and where writing, rewriting, and editing are a joint process. Such specialization and division of labor are also conducive to longer author lists.

For each of these developments, we can have a discussion about the scope and desirability of the development, but I happen to believe that most of these have allowed us to address bigger questions, get at these questions from more perspectives, and encourage both specialization and critical thinking within research teams. What is crucial to the discussion is that authorship is not merely about writing. Authorship is the outcome of a contribution to a research process. It should reflect a work division,
a workflow, and it acknowledges credits beyond the act of writing. Authorship can stem from having an early idea (and getting it funded), from data analysis and presentation, and from actual writing.

Does this mean that team science and multiple authored pieces is the only way forward. No! There is plenty of space for different traditions and modes of working. What it does mean, however, is to have an open dialogue about these changes, how it affects our research processes, and ultimately our author lists. This dialogue must be open and cognizant of power relationships (e.g., institutional, between senior and junior scholars, between different groups and disciplines). It must involve editors and scholars serving on tenure review and hiring committees to established a shared understanding of this. We can learn a lot from other fields and emerging practices in our own in terms of how we give credit to larger and more modest contributions to the different phases in the research process (see also Kerr’s essay). At the end of the day, authorship should be inclusive, transparent, and reflective of actual contributions to a research process, which is oftentimes a team effort.

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Author Transparency: Learning From Biomedical Research

I agree with Kerr that a consistent disclosure policy is needed to document contributors as well as sustain high ethical publication standards that advance the transparency and accuracy of published research. The current essay adds some rationales from biomedical research and offers a framework to document authorship from the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA).

Similar to de Vreese, I suggest an increased division of labor often is needed to conduct research and prepare journal articles, which frequently includes colleagues with writing as well as nonwriting responsibilities. I suggest grant review processes intensify the formation of research teams with segmented expertise where the assistance in specialized areas (such as expertise in the application of a statistical test) may be as or more important than writing contributions. Because each contributor is important to a research grant’s status, contemporary grant review and journal preparation processes foster the expansion of research participants who merit recognition as authors.

In biomedical research, some of the additional developments that tilt the balance toward contributor disclosure include the increasing importance of meta-analyses and systematic reviews, reproducibility challenges, and recent leadership efforts among the editors of leading medical and public health journals.

Although individual studies once represented the most rigorous form of evidence-based biomedical research, the U.S. National Preventive Services Task Force now
Authors’ Note
Geri Pearson wrote the original draft. Charon Pierson provided critical review and editing. Both authors approve the final version. Neither author has competing interests related to this project. We are both Trustees with COPE and are advanced nurse practitioners. Dr. Pearson has focused her career on child and adolescent psychiatry, and Dr. Pierson is a gerontologic specialist and a sociologist. We are current or emeritus editors of scholarly nursing journals.

References


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