British Sociological Association: Authorship Guidelines for Academic Papers

The BSA's Equality of the Sexes Committee has worked extensively on these guidelines which are designed to complement existing guidelines for good professional conduct and ethical practice as listed on this site. First Published in 2001.

Background

Sociologists publish their research for a number of reasons. They may wish to inform policy, increase debate amongst colleagues and feed back findings to participants. However, publications are increasingly vital for research and lecturing careers. Assigning appropriate authorship is an important part of good research practice. To date, there has been more discussion about guidelines for authorship in the medical, biological and physical sciences than in the social sciences (Macintyre 1997). Problems arise when different contributors have different expectations of who should (and should not) be included as an author, sometimes because of different conventions in different disciplines or because of differences in seniority and changes in conventions over time. **In practice, postgraduate students, junior research staff and those who are no longer employed when a paper is written (often contract research staff) are most likely to be disadvantaged when authorship is assigned (Digiusto 1994)**.

Two particular problems have been highlighted: honorary authorship (named authors who have not met authorship criteria) and ghost authorship (individuals not named as authors but who have contributed substantially to the work). A review of peer-reviewed articles in medical journals found that 19% had evidence of honorary

authors and 11% had evidence of ghost authors (Flanagin *et al.* 1998). Unequal

power relations may influence this process. Junior researchers may feel pressured to

accept or assign honorary authorship because they do not want to offend their bosses

who have substantial power over their future career, they need to increase their

publication list quickly in order to secure their next job or because they believe that

including more experienced colleagues as authors will increase their chances of

publication. Other common reasons for honorary authorship include repaying

favours, encouraging collaboration and maintain good working relationships (Bhopal

et al. 1997). Ghost authorship may come about because of differences in the criteria

that junior and senior researchers use to define authorship. Junior researchers may put

more emphasis on having done practical work, while more senior social scientists

may put the emphasis on ideas and data interpretation. Therefore, there may be

conflict between the views of junior researchers who have gathered data (particularly

qualitative data where analysis is ongoing) but have been forced to move onto a new

project as funding has run out, and senior researchers who have drafted the paper.

Using the guidelines

These guidelines are intended for use by all BSA members. They should be used by

Heads of department as a basis for departmental discussions and decisions about

institutional policy and practice on authorship. Heads of department should also bear

in mind that the relative power of different members of the department will influence

how guidelines are interpreted. Senior researchers, supervisors and chairs of research

committee can use these guidelines to discuss models of authorship at an early stage

in research projects. Postgraduate students and junior researchers can also use these

guidelines to initiate a discussion about authorship, particularly if the subject has not

been raised by their supervisors. Different guidelines may also be required for more theoretical papers and review articles.

General points

1) Authorship should be discussed between researchers at an early stage in any project and renegotiated as necessary. Where possible, there should be agreement on which papers will be written jointly (and who will first author each paper), and which will be single authored, with an agreed acknowledgement given to contributors. Many disputes can be avoided by a clear common understanding of standards for authorship (especially in multi-disciplinary groups). A record should be made of these discussions. Early drafts of papers should include authorship and other credits to help resolve any future disputes.

2) Students should normally be the first author on any multi-authored article based on their thesis or dissertation. "Students should be aware of their rights…to publish papers independently of their supervisors. Where students are working as part of a larger project team, or where joint supervisor/student publications are proposed, questions of intellectual property rights should be carefully considered" (BSA guidelines 1996).

3) More senior BSA members are encouraged to give more junior colleagues opportunities to be first author when appropriate.

4) If disputes cannot be settled by the authors, there should be some mechanism within departments where a third party can arbitrate.

5) Departments should have an authorship policy included in staff manuals and make sure that new (and existing) staff are aware of them.

Attributing authorship

Authorship should be reserved for those, and only those, who have made significant intellectual contribution to the research. Participation solely in the acquisition of funding or general supervision of the research group is not sufficient for authorship. Honorary authorship is not acceptable.

1) Everyone who is listed as an author should have made a substantial direct academic contribution (ie intellectual responsibility and substantive work) to at least **two** of the four main components of a typical scientific project or paper:-

a) Conception or design

b) Data collection and processing

c) Analysis and interpretation of the data

d) Writing substantial sections of the paper (e.g. synthesising findings in the literature review or the findings / results section)

2) Everyone who is listed as an author should have critically reviewed successive drafts of the paper and should approve the final version.

3) Everyone who is listed as author should be able to defend the paper as a whole (although not necessarily all the technical details).

Order of authors

1) The person who has made the major contribution to the paper and / or taken the lead in writing is entitled to be the first author

2) Decisions about who should be an author, the order of authors and those included in the acknowledgements should usually be made by the first author in consultation with other authors.

3) Those who have made a major contribution to analysis or writing (ie more than commenting in detail on successive drafts) are entitled to follow the first author immediately; where there is a clear difference in the size of these contributions, this should be reflected in the order of these authors.

4) All others who fulfil the criteria for authorship should complete the list in alphabetical order of their surnames.

5) If all the authors feel that they have contributed equally to the paper, this can be indicated in a footnote.

Decisions about acknowledgements

All those who make a substantial contribution to a paper without fulfilling the criteria for authorship should be acknowledged, usually in an acknowledgement section specifying their contributions. These might include interviewers, survey management staff, data processors, computing staff, clerical staff, statistical advisers, colleagues who have reviewed the paper, students who have undertaken some sessional work, the

supervisor of a research team and someone who has provided assistance in obtaining funding (Macintyre 1995).

Other suggestions

- Some journals require authors to sign a statement justifying authorship and specifying the actual contribution of each author. Some departments also require authors to do this for papers submitted to any academic journal.

- Digiusto (1994) has suggested a points system in order to evaluate contribution to publications in order to decide who merits authorship and in what order.

- The British Medical Journal now lists contributors in two ways. They publish a list of authors' names at the beginning of the paper, then list contributors (some of whom may not be included as authors) at the end of the paper, giving details of who did what. One or more of these contributors are listed as guarantors, which means they are prepared to take public responsibility for the paper as a whole. (See http://www.bmj.com/advice/3.html).

- The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was set up in 1997 by a group of biomedical journal editors. Part of its remit is to formulate guidelines on good research and publication practice and to advise journal editors on publication and research misconduct, including disputes amongst authors. (See http://www.bmjpg.com/cope/cope.htm)

Acknowledgements

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