**Editorial: Authors and Authorship—Reform or Abolition?**

Authors of distinction are cherished. Civilization begins with language. Language communicates, it is perhaps a truism to say, what is richest and most rewarding in human thought. In written form, the riches of imagination, knowledge, and creativity become the record of our common heritage. This is not less true for science than for the humanities. It is little wonder, then, that in all civilized societies authorship is prized and, sometimes, rewarded.

When we speak of scientific authorship, and of authorship in the monthly round of a journal such as this one, one must descend from these numerous heights to confront the claims of authorship by those who submit and publish papers. How should we adjudicate authorship? An author, all will agree, is first of all a writer. Not any writer—mere reporting, translation, and plagiarism do not earn the title. What is common to these nonauthors is the absence of original thought or a web of thoughts they have themselves created and thus own.

The idea of ownership may ring crassly here. The suggestion is not intended as an endorsement of the recent Klondike Rush by biomedical scientists on the US Patent Office. Neither science, nor the academic world in which it still largely resides, is or can be divorced from the society of which it is a subsystem. The prime criterion of merit in these interlocking subsystems is advancement of knowledge, most meritoriously through original contributions. What this translates to is priority for a given discovery or concept, as Robert Merton so clearly showed in the opposing claims of Newton and Leibniz to the invention of the calculus. Publication establishes repute and the claim for the record. In all major universities, as everyone knows, promotions in large part hinge on authorship.

Only in recent years has authorship become a matter of contention that calls for definition. Contention follows the displacement and virtual extinction of solo science and small science by big science. Large-scale enterprises involving numerous more and less specialized collaborators have multiplied the potential claimants to authorship for any given paper. When, as is often the case, so much hangs on the decision, collegiality can dissolve and feuding replace friendship. New and varied practices have arisen to accommodate all the claimants to authorship. The relevant literature reflects some of these observations; others are based on half a century—precisely—of participant observation.

Many of the new practices bear no resemblance to the tradition of authorship on which scholarship as well as the complexities of copyright and libel law were founded. A key assumption of the tradition is responsibility for what one publishes, and hence accountability for what is false, fraudulent, or taken without acknowledgment. Authorship has been extorted as the price of needed data or even patients. Honorary authorship has appeased heads of departments or secured the cover of their prestige. Gifts of authorship have sustained friendships or merely marked kindness toward a colleague or junior in need.

In the mid-1980s the self-constituted International Committee of Medical Journal Editors confronted the question of defining authorship. Resolve followed the Darsey case. Darsey was the young first author of multiple blatantly fraudulent publications of fictitious data. In several, this apparently brilliant young scientist...
had the coauthorship and imprimatur of the distinguished head of a Harvard department (clearly a huge embarrassment). Similar cases have followed.

The committee agreed on a definition of authorship and on a statement of criteria that their journals would henceforth require all authors to sign. All authors must state that they have made substantial contributions to each of three activities: (1) conception and design, or analysis and interpretation; (2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; (3) approval of the final version to be published. This Journal has adhered to the committee’s requirements.

It is no secret among authors and scientists, and now even among editors— as is perhaps fitting we seem to be the last to know, or at least to confess to knowing—that these requirements are often flouted, solemn signed statements notwithstanding. Indeed, I must admit to failing to persuade first authors who were my coauthors and juniors to observe the spirit of the rules in enlisting authors.

One suggestion in the committee’s revised Uniform Requirements is that editors “may ask authors to describe what each contributed.” Such a request may not secure any tighter control of authorship claims than do more general signed statements. I must emphasize here that the signatories to these various claims are generally not dishonorable prevaricators. They and we are caught in the toils of a social subsystem in which survival demands accommodation of the truth.

The Uniform Requirements add, however, that the information describing author’s contributions “may be published.” In this permissive cadenza, we see a little more promise of an effective measure. The Committee B on Professional Ethics of the American Association of University Professors took a similar stance.

Exercised for the integrity of both the Journal and our authors, we prepared to ask that authors, in their signed statements, describe their exact contributions for publication in a footnote. But we stayed our hand when we came upon an editorial by Richard Smith, editor of the British Medical Journal, reporting on a meeting about these questions. The view propounded is that the system of authorship is broken and that no tinkering with requirements will fix it.

Instead, Smith offers a modest proposal—less savage than Jonathan Swift’s, but as radical—to abolish authorship altogether. Authors would be replaced by “contributors,” each of whose contributions would be specified, as in the credits for movies. With loss of authorship would go not only pride but responsibility and accountability. The suggested remedy is to have “guarantors” who would take responsibility for the paper overall—and also, one presumes, for those aspects that are unspecified or are not subject to specification. For the latter, one example cited is the possibility of fraudulent data.

The British Medical Journal does not intend to adopt such a plan forthwith. Its temperate course is to solicit the opinions of its readers. In light of this moderate approach, we conclude that we should do no less. So for the moment we shilly-shally and ask our readers, and potential authors in particular, to let us have their thoughts. Those with an interest at stake need to take note. The concern arising from the literature and the related correspondence, as well as from the experience of editors and authors, will surely fracture the status quo as, indeed, the Journal was on the verge of doing.

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Editor

References

Editorial: Statistics in the Journal—Significance, Confidence, and All That

Certain statistical problems in papers submitted to the Journal regularly require editorial advice. Guidelines for presenting results in general in medical journals, and for clinical trials in particular, can be found in medical journals. Here, we guide authors about the preferences of this journal in statistical matters, as we continue to inform readers on methods and procedures used by the editors. For the work published to be given its due, we must adhere to modern-day statistical standards. These may sometimes go beyond the skills of a prospective author. If so, then the author should of course enlist statistical help.

No pronouncement about science and scientific procedures can pretend to be final, and our thinking about statistical presentations continues to evolve. The diverse readership of the Journal requires us to cross disciplines and find common ground in the reporting of results, but also arms us with variety in methods. We do not wish to forgo this richness by rigid adherence to narrow requirements. In what follows, we deal in sequence with statistics as they appear in the standard sections of a scientific paper.

The introduction to a paper sets out the ways in which the work reported might bring new knowledge or complement existing knowledge. Naturally, for papers on methods per se, statistical considerations will first appear here. The Journal publishes such papers when they are novel and meaningful for public health.

Otherwise, statistical considerations first appear in the methods section. Careful descriptions of the study design and of the data are central. If primary sources were used, what data were collected and in what manner? What population or what sample was studied? If secondary sources were used, how were these particular data sufficient for the analysis at hand?