

FULL PAPERS

HONORARY AUTHORS AND UNWITTING: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH A JOURNAL FROM A PUBLISHER INCLUDED IN THE BEALL'S LIST OF PREDATORY PUBLISHERS

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Abstract: Honorary authorship is naming as authors individuals not meeting authorship criteria. Disregarding or violating authorship criteria undermines research accountability and it's a reason for paper retraction.

Two of us (MC, CH) were unwittingly included as authors of a paper in an open access journal from a predatory publisher according to the Beall's list. Discovery occurred on Google Scholar. Data used in the paper were collected by the corresponding author while she was visiting scholar at MC's lab. Data were inconclusive and were presented with multiple fabrications and falsifications. Two of us (FM, GM) were not mentioned despite major contributions to study conception and data acquisition.

We asked the editor-in-chief for paper retraction, informed the corresponding author's University in India, and the Indian Society for Scientific Values (ISSV). The editor-in-chief agreed about retraction, which was however delayed with specious reasons. ISSV will take up the case only after retraction. The corresponding author's University did not reply so far. After one year, the paper is still online, and might be retrieved by anyone e.g. reviewing unwitting authors' manuscripts or grant applications.

This case highlights the need to develop sound authorship criteria and best practices to ensure integrity of the authorship attribution process as well as of scientific publications as a whole. The potential role of research institutions, scientific societies and other national and international bodies will be critically analysed.

Key words: authorship criteria; honorary authorship; scientific misconduct; predatory journals

1 Introduction

Results of scientific research are usually communicated in the form of meeting presentations, journal articles, books and other original work. Authorship of abstracts, articles, books and book chapters, patents, etc. are the basis for individual credit and reputation among peers as well as more in general at the societal level, and may have important implications for academic career, social acknowledgement and popularity, economic and financial revenues, etc. From a societal point of view, academic authorship is one of the main fundamentals of scientific research accountability, and unethical allocation of authorship credit is considered as a kind of scientific misconduct (reviewed in Kumar, 2008).

Criteria for authorship assignment are usually different across academic disciplines, and even journal editors do not always agree on what constitutes authorship. In the biomedical field however the most authoritative and extensively acknowledged guidance has been published and periodically updated by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2016). According to the ICMJE, authorship should be based on the following 4 criteria:

- i. *“Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND*
- ii. *Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND*
- iii. *Final approval of the version to be published; AND*
- iv. *Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.*

In addition to being accountable for the parts of the work he or she has done, an author should be able to identify which co-authors are responsible for specific other parts of the work. In addition, authors should have confidence in the integrity of the contributions of their co-authors. All those designated as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, and all who meet the four criteria should be identified as authors.” (ICMJE, 2016).

Several types of infringement of authorship criteria are well known to occur across the scientific community, resulting in various types of fake authorship (Table 1).

Besides these well known categories, in recent years a novel type of misattributed authorship is being reported, which consists in the inclusion of senior colleagues as co-authors without their knowledge (Dyer et al., 2017; McCook, 2016). Such behaviour has been reported to occur together with data fabrication/falsification and may aim at increasing the impact of the manuscript as well as the reputation of the author, who in this way appears to have conducted fruitful collaboration with well known senior colleagues.

We report hereafter a recent experience involving some of us, who discovered just by chance that they had been unwittingly included as authors of a paper in an open-access journal from a predatory publisher according to the Beall’s List. The case is discussed in the context of the current framework for authorship protection and paper retraction, highlighting its inherent limitations and suggesting possible solutions.

2 Case study

2.1 *The beginning: asking to delete authors’ names*

On September 13th 2015, one of us (MC) serendipitously discovered – thanks to the automatic email update service provided by Google Scholar – that he had been listed as co-author on a recent paper (from here and thereafter “Paper”) published on an open-access journal (“Journal”). The Paper listed a total of four co-authors, including the corresponding author (SR), who in 2007 had been visiting scholar at MC’s lab. The Journal which published the Paper was at the time included in the

Table 1

Unethical allocation of authorship credit (adapted from: Kumar, 2008; Pearson, 2006; Weijer and Akabayashi, 2003)

Type	Description
Guest authorship	One has not done any significant work towards the paper but has his name as one of the authors.
Gift authorship	A kind of guest authorship in which the authorship has been gifted to a person by other author/s, to receive some other favours in return from the 'gift author' (e.g., the gift author is a senior researcher involved in promotion and salary of other authors).
Pressured authorship	Also known as "publication parasitism", it occurs when a senior colleague forces the original researchers to include his/her name due to the fear of his/her authority in the institution.
Ghost authorship	The named author is not the actual author of the article. It typically occurs in industry-academic partnerships, e.g. whenever drug companies would like to mask their involvement in the research thereby hiding their conflict of interests.
Honorary authorship	Similar to gift authorship, except that it does not necessarily imply any favours in return. For instance, biologists may routinely put supervisors or lab heads last in an author list, while organic chemists might put them first, and in some countries it is standard for the department head to take credit on a paper regardless of contribution.

Beall's List of potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers, a list published and regularly updated by University of Colorado Denver librarian and researcher Jeffrey Beall, including open-access publishers which, according to Beall's definition, tend to exploit the open-access model by charging the authors fees without providing all the expected publishing services display "*an intention to deceive authors and readers, and a lack of transparency in their operations and processes*" (Butler, 2013). Jeffrey Beall coined the term "predatory publishing", one of the most prominent questionable practices of these journals being the publication of manuscripts without any rigorous editorial and/or peer review, as also suggested by the results obtained by John Bohannon, a staff writer for the journal *Science*, who submitted to 304 open-access journals a spoof paper which was eventually accepted by about 50% of them (Bohannon, 2013).

The data used in the Paper had been actually collected by SR at MC's lab during her stay, however they were used without MC's knowledge and permission. In previous discussions with SR, MC clearly expressed his definite opinion that data were inconclusive and at least awaited further confirmation in replication experiments. SR was therefore well aware that MC would not agree with their publication in the present form.

Further concern was due to the failure by SR to acknowledge: (i) the role of another colleague (GJMM, co-author of the present study), who substantially contributed to the conception and design of the work, and assisted SR in performing some assays; (ii)

the role of the colleagues and staff at MC's lab, who extensively supported SR in her work and performed many of the assays; and (iii) the fellowship grant that SR received from the hosting University during her stay in MC's lab. Finally, among the co-authors was listed another colleague (CH, also co-author of the present study), who had been SR's mentor and was not aware as well of the existence of the present Paper.

After a brief email consultation, we (MC, GJMM, CH) decided to ask the Editor-in-Chief (EIC) of the Journal to delete MC's name from the list of authors, as well as from all related records, stating that none of us knew about the manuscript and had any opportunity to revise the text and therefore to approve it. Furthermore, none of us would agree to be accountable for the work and would support its accuracy or integrity.

2.2 *Further step: reviewing the paper and identifying serious misconduct in data analysis and reporting, supporting a retraction request*

The EIC replied in less than 24 h, stating that “*we take issues such as the ones you've raised above very seriously and we will take the appropriate measures*”. However he also added that before proceeding with any action, he would like to know from us “*whether or not the data presented in this paper... meets the scientific rigor that you would have expected had [SR]seen fit to have you look at the paper prior to its submission*”.

We therefore performed a thorough analysis of the data as presented in the Paper, comparing them with the records contained in the lab books of MC's lab, and in a subsequent email to the EIC we highlighted the following main flaws:

(i) Several figure legends were mistakenly attributed. In the legends it was stated that $n = 5$ replications were performed, however according to our records only one sample was assayed in duplicate. Pretended significance of the differences was therefore not supported by any reproducibility of the data and of course neither by any statistical analysis;

(ii) In legends to other figures, it was stated that $n = 5$ replications were performed however, according to our records, samples from only 2–3 different subjects were assayed. Reproducibility and statistical significances therefore were not supported by the data;

(iii) In several instances it was stated that 5 replicates were performed, however in our lab records we had only 3 experiments, which moreover did not include treatments with many of the reported pharmacological agents. Moreover, statistical analysis as described in the methods and figure legends made no sense at all;

(iv) In the methods used for cell proliferation, the use of ^3H thymidine was mentioned, however no results were subsequently provided. Indeed, no experiments with ^3H thymidine were ever planned, also because the technique was not available in our lab.

We detailed our findings in a subsequent email to the EIC, concluding that as a whole the Paper suffered from many serious violations of scientific integrity, including data falsification.

Once more, the EIC replied stating that he was going to meet with “*several members*” of the Editorial Board of the Journal. He was back in touch with us on October 12th 2015, about one month after our initial report, proposing two alternative options: (i) email

him a short note stating that the Paper was submitted without our consent, and asking to delete the names of unwitting authors (which we actually already did one month before, in our first email!), or (ii) ask for retraction. In the latter case the EIC would have informed SR's institution, but he also added that he would publish the retraction but SR could choose not to agree with this decision. It was unclear what would then happen, in that case. We therefore asked for clarification, but the EIC just confirmed his previous email without adding any additional detail.

At this step, we decided to inform officially the Rector of MC's University, which originally provided the fellowship grant to SR and that was mentioned in the Paper as the affiliation of MC. We also informed the Chancellor and the Vice Chancellor of the University in India where SR was currently working. We were then back in touch with the EIC asking for a retraction of the Paper "*for research misconduct, and to protect our scientific reputation as well as the reputation of our institutions*".

This time, the EIC replied stating that he completed the analysis of our request and that his decision was to retract the paper. To this end, he asked that we will write a short paragraph regarding the retraction, for publication in the next available issue of the Journal. He also added that "[he] *decided that, indeed, [SR] has committed 'scientific misconduct'. However, due process dictates that she will have an opportunity to indicate if she does or does not agree to the retraction of this paper. This formality is in keeping with standard procedures regarding matters such as these. I anticipate that she will not sign on to the retraction, but nevertheless the paper in question IS TO BE RETRACTED* [uppercase in EIC's email]". On November 7th 2015 we sent the required paragraph, which the EIC forwarded to the Editorial Office (?) of the Journal 10 days later, stating in the email that he "*will await [SR]'s response. She can disagree with the retraction. However, this paper is hereby retracted.*"

2.3 Indefinite procrastination

Despite EIC emails and commitment, on December 30th 2015 the paper was still online, and a web page counter indicated that it had been visualized more than 11,000 times (!). During 2016, we contacted several times the EIC, who as usually replied with generic apologies, reassuring us about the ongoing process, but at some point also stating that the corresponding author, SR, was opposing the decision.

Meanwhile, we had written also to the President and to the Secretary of the Society for Scientific Values in India, providing them with all the information about the case. They quickly answered in less than 24 h, stating that SR "*appears to be guilty of fabrication of data, forgery and cheating. In any case, the journal should retract the paper on the complaint of the two co-authors who were not involved in clearing the manuscript.*" They however also added "*Please let me know when the Journal retracts the paper. We will, thereafter, take up the case with the Vice Chancellor*".

As a final step, more than 6 months after our official request for retraction and nearly 9 months after our initial report to the Journal, we contacted RetractionWatch, a blog that reports on retractions of scientific papers to increase the transparency of the process, and obtained an interview which allowed us at least to clarify that we were very frustrated by the delay in the retraction of the Paper and that we worried very

much about the possibility “*that anyone might retrieve this paper e.g. while reviewing a submitted manuscript or even a grant application from my group. It will be never possible to establish whether, when and how it might happen, but clearly this is a serious possibility as long as that paper will remain out on the web.*” (Palus, 2016).

In the meantime: MCs University, which as all universities in Italy has no Office for Research Integrity and/or any dedicated offices, took no action; SR’s University in India provided no answer; the Society for Scientific Values in India answered (as above described) stating that they would not take any step before the Journal would retract the Paper. And of course the Journal did not retract the paper at least for the whole year 2016.

2.4 *Finally an end, maybe*

The case came to an apparent end only at the beginning of 2017, when SR contacted by email MC to inform that her University in India was going to take serious sanctions on her based on the allegations received in the previous months. It is noteworthy that the University in India never acknowledged the receipt of our email and/or surface mail sent by courier. MC replied stating that “*I sincerely hope that you will not suffer any excessive consequences from this very sad situation. From the personal point of view I remember you during your stay in our institute as a very serious and hard working researcher, as it is also stated in the letter of support which I was pleased to provide you in 2008. I can easily believe that the subsequent events were due mainly to lack of experience and excess of naivety. Nonetheless, I am also confident that at this point you can very clearly perceive the seriousness of what happened.*” Despite her previous opposition, SR now complied with MC’s requirement to support the Paper retraction request, which she did several times without any answer from the EIC of the Journal. Anyway, after some weeks the Paper was finally retracted and the retraction note now available on the Journal website states that “*soon after publication of the paper in the Volume..., the authors of the paper would like to retract the paper for their personal reasons.*”

We are not aware of any specific agreement or transaction eventually occurred between SR, the Paper corresponding author, and the EIC of the Journal, neither we know about any eventual result of the putative disciplinary procedure at SR’s University in India. Meanwhile, SR has published three more papers on this same Journal.

3 Discussion

Academic authorship is fundamental for research accountability as well as for individual reputation and career of scientists. It is therefore surprising that very few is made to ensure honest and ethic authorship attribution. But who is actually in charge of such a fundamental responsibility?

According to the ICMJE (2016), “*The individuals who conduct the work are responsible for identifying who meets these criteria and ideally should do so when planning the work, making modifications as appropriate as the work progresses. It is the collective responsibility of the authors, not the journal to which the work is submitted, to determine that all people named as authors meet all four criteria [mentioned in the Introduction*

section]; *it is not the role of journal editors to determine who qualifies or does not qualify for authorship or to arbitrate authorship conflicts.*"

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), with over 10 000 members worldwide among journal editors from all academic fields, provides advice to editors and publishers on all aspects of publication ethics and, in particular, how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct. The COPE in 2003 issued a guideline for authors about how to handle authorship disputes (COPE, 2003). According to such guidelines, *"You may ask a journal to withdraw your name from a paper if it has been included against your wishes. However most editors are reluctant to get involved in disputes about omitted authors since they do not have enough information to judge such cases. Some journals have an ombudsman, but they deal with cases of alleged misconduct by the journal. Similarly, COPE only hears cases submitted by journal editors and is not an appeal body for cases of disputed authorship."*

Both the ICMJE and the COPE therefore support the notion that it is not the primary responsibility of journals and editors to deal with authorship conflicts, and that scientists are primarily responsible to identify who meets criteria for authorship, a situation which nonetheless is in turn widely vulnerable to flaws and frauds like those summarized in Table 1 and described in the present case report.

Interestingly, however, the ICMJE also states that *"If agreement cannot be reached about who qualifies for authorship, the institution(s) where the work was performed, not the journal editor, should be asked to investigate."* The COPE database includes some cases which were actually resolved with a similar approach (COPE, 2015). Indeed, some of us previously already supported the idea that also institutions must be accountable for research integrity (Cosentino and Picozzi, 2013), considering that so far *"unfortunately, research institutions are still mainly concerned with responding to allegations of misconduct. They are, however, affected by individual researchers' misconduct in that their reputation will be damaged and their attractiveness reduced to potential funders and partners in scientific research. Prevention of misconduct and training in research integrity, targeting primarily young researchers, should therefore become a priority and will also meet ethical and social obligations and responsibilities."*

In the case described above, institutions are absent for most of the time: the University where the unwitting co-author was working was informed that its name was included into an extensively flawed Paper freely available on the Internet but did not take any initiative. It must be mentioned that in Italy no universities have anything similar to an Office for Research Integrity, and research integrity issues still receive low priority in both teaching and research. On the other side, the University in India where the corresponding author of the paper presently works, although nearly immediately informed, did not act to any appreciable extent for more than one year, and we can just hypothesize that eventually any disciplinary procedure took place, based on the recent email correspondence between the corresponding author and the unwitting co-author. No information however is available on the website of such University, in particular regarding research integrity policies and procedures.

A first conclusion which can be drawn from the present experience is that institutions where scientists work should be prepared to take their own responsibility in ensuring the integrity of research performed under their names, as well as to deal

with allegations of misconduct, for the reasons mentioned above (Cosentino and Picozzi, 2013). We believe however that the successful achievement of such objectives is not just a matter of rules, audits and eventually of sanctions, but – first of all – it depends on the promotion and development of an appropriate institutional culture and environment which should support individual and collective behaviours characterized by transparency, openness, continuous discussion and exchange of information among research groups as well as between individual researchers. Academic departments should encourage periodical meetings and seminars where researchers will have the opportunity to present and discuss their ongoing research activities, confronting with both junior and senior colleagues. We consider that a paper (a book, a book chapter, etc.) which includes the affiliation of our institution, even if it does not list our names among the authors, may nonetheless affect in some way also our own reputation, as well as the reputation of all the people working in the institution. We were recently told about the “experimental procedure” attempted in a Portuguese University, where the authors of a study, before submission to a scholarly journal, sent out the manuscript for review and discussion to all the members of the department (Laura Ribeiro, personal communication). Such kind of procedure should be carefully evaluated in terms of costs and benefits as well as of sustainability, in particular in large and/or multi/interdisciplinary departments, nonetheless we feel that novel approaches like this one might have the potential to significantly improve the overall quality and integrity of research, including the fairness of the authorship attribution process.

From the technical point of view, journals and publishers should also take some responsibility, e.g. in doing their best to ensure that the indicated authors are actually aware and agreeing to be listed as authors. An increasing number of journals is now sending all the correspondence related to a manuscript submission not only to the corresponding author but also to all the other authors. The use of fake email accounts may however easily circumvent this measure. Faking an email account is a well known strategy e.g. to allow for fake reviews by the authors themselves (Ferguson et al., 2014). It would be ethical that scientists use their institutional email in any situation related to their scholarly work (when submitting manuscripts to journals, as email address for future correspondence, as email contact during the process of grant application submissions etc.). Such a behavior would result in a sort of certification of the identity of the person sending (and receiving) the correspondence, at the same time also representing a sort of due acknowledgement of the support received from the institution which is hosting the scientist.

A final comment is deserved by the fact that the reported case involved a Journal by a publisher at the time included in the *Beall's List of potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers*. Indeed, the EIC of the Journal adopted a self-contradictory and procrastinating approach, and delayed Paper retraction for more than one year, finally mentioning in the retraction note just “*personal reasons*” of the authors as the only explanation.

Since then, Jeffrey Beall, associate professor and librarian at the University of Colorado Denver, has decided to take down his website, which is now no longer available (Oransky, 2017), and it seems that also his personal faculty page is no longer available (Kulkarni, 2017). Beall's blog had listed more than 1000 open-access publishers

which used more or less fraudulent practices, undermining the open-access model and in a wider perspective the confidence of the scientific community and of the society in general in scientific research. His list over the years was actually also a source of controversies and some publishers threatened to sue Beall for defamation (Kulkarni, 2017). Our experience with a Journal and a Publisher originally included in the Beall's List cannot but support the need for more research and inspection into the methodologies and practices of the too many questionable open-access publishers.

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