

Tricky question on academic integrity

An expert provided an answer on a tricky question on academic integrity. It was previously published in the [regular ENAI newsletter](#) (August 7th, 2018).

What To Do When: My supervisor wants to be a co-author of my paper

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Questions about authorship and attribution are among the most common and most difficult in academia. While clear and helpful guidelines, such as those put forth by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), are readily available, pressure to include a supervisor or high-profile associate can be intense, especially early in one's academic career.

Consider the following scenario:

Rebecca, a first-year PhD student, has just finished her first research study and shares a draft with her supervisor of an article based on her study, in final preparation for submission to a scholarly journal. Rebecca's supervisor returns a draft of the article with comments and minor editing suggestions, and has also added his own name, the lab supervisor's name, and the names of two high-profile colleagues who had no involvement in the study, to the revised draft, with a note to make the corrections and then submit. Rebecca knows that none of the newly added names meets the technical requirements for authorship, but what can she do?

First, it would be wise for Rebecca to get a sense of the norms of both her discipline and for the academic culture at her university and program. While most journal editors agree that only those who make substantive contributions to the academic work should be included as authors, authorship expectations can vary widely depending on disciplinary and institutional culture. Knowing what is customary can help dictate how best to proceed.

Next, Rebecca will need to make an honest assessment of risks she is likely to face if she objects to the gift- or honorary authors. Factors to consider include her supervisor's openness to being challenged, his status in the university and scholarly community, and her own status within the university and the discipline. Is she willing to face potential repercussions that could include losing her position? Once she understands the risks and the norms, potential responses include the following:

Rebecca could ask to speak to her supervisor and express her concerns, requesting an explanation as to why the names were added. As a very junior researcher, it is, of course, legitimate, to ask about anything about which one has concerns. The primary risk is offending or alienating the supervisor, so maximum tact should be used in order to preserve the relationship.

Especially if gift authorship is not the norm at the institution, Rebecca might choose instead to speak with one of her supervisor's peers or superiors for advice or assistance. This carries an even greater risk of offending the supervisor, but may open the possibility of finding another supervisor. It should be noted that one must always assume that colleagues will share information with each other, and that if

gift-authorship is the cultural norm, this course of action will almost certainly alienate Rebecca from not only her supervisor but also the others.

Rebecca could circulate the article to those added as authors, with a message that says that her supervisor has added them and she wants to let them review the article, because as they are listed as authors, they will be held responsible for its contents. This is a less-directly confrontational choice, but still carries some risks. What makes it an attractive option is that it has the potential to open up space for discussion. It may be that the newly listed authors were unaware of their inclusion and will request to be removed. It is also possible, however, that Rebecca will be seen as hostile or disruptive, or that this action too will offend or alienate her supervisor. (I personally like this option because it affords each listed author the choice to opt in or out.)

Rebecca could decide to submit the paper with only her name, or only her name and that of her supervisor. This, of course, risks alienating the supervisor and potentially the authors whose names were added and then removed, should the paper be accepted and published. Not bringing the issue up directly also virtually guarantees that the situation will repeat itself the next time Rebecca submits a draft to her supervisor.

Rebecca could do as her supervisor suggests and simply submit the paper with guest authors. While this course of action seems the least risky to Rebecca in the immediate sense, not only is it a breach of most publications guidelines, it also opens Rebecca and her supervisor to the possibility that if the other people listed as authors were not consulted, they could potentially object.

Lastly, Rebecca could simply decide not to submit the paper for publication, or even to leave the program entirely. While the risk of this choice to Rebecca is obvious, perhaps less obvious is the harm to academia in general when young scholars are discouraged early in their careers by demands that they share credit with scholars who did not actually contribute to their work. This is but one reason why the practice of guest authorship is a concern to us all.

Find further information [here](#).