

Description

Scientific authorship is an important element of any paper. It provides credit to those who worked on the paper, as well as accountability if anything is found to be incorrect. Researchers want their name on papers to help them in their career, and often strive for the lead author credit. Although most projects simply list all contributors as authors, some choose to include an honorary or ghost author, two potentially problematic authorships.

What is Honorary Authorship?

Honorary authorship, also known as guest authorship, occurs when a person is listed as an author who has not provided any significant assistance to the study. Typically, this happens when a senior member or supervisor is listed on research undertaken in their department, even if he or she has not actually contributed to the study. Sometimes, honorary authorships are given in order to curry favor or enhance the credibility of the paper. Adding an author on an honorary basis can lead to problems. It takes some of the credit away from those who did the work, while giving credit and prestige to those who have done nothing. Additionally, if there is a problem found in the research, an honorary author might be seen as culpable.

What is Ghost Authorship?

Ghost authorship comes with the opposite problem: a person who has provided significant assistance is omitted as an author. One reason a person might be omitted is when they helped to write the paper but did not otherwise contribute to the research, in which that person is usually referred to as a ghostwriter. Students or technicians who help with the research might also be omitted, thereby not receiving any credit.

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Although these omissions do not provide adequate credit to those who contributed, they do not necessarily pose a problem. However, ghost authorship can be used wrongly, such as to obscure potential conflict of interest in research. An example would be omitting the name of an employee of a

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pharmaceutical company that assisted the research into a particular drug.

What are the Ethical Issues Involved?

There are important ethical issues to understand with both honorary and ghost authorship. Although both can be used for valid reasons, they are often used for foul purposes. Providing guest or honorary authorship just to try to make a paper more prestigious or legitimate undermines the work that has gone into the research, and could damage the findings in the long run. Ghost authorship is likewise problematic and unethical, as it does not provide credit where credit is due and can be used to manipulate the data and findings.

Guidelines for Authorship

Some journals and other organizations have started to implement strict guidelines to deter the authorship abuse caused by these types of authorship. For example, the journal Nature now includes descriptions of the contribution of each author to clarify exactly what everyone has done and shared with the research. Listing everyone who has helped on the project in an honest and open way will ensure that authorship is properly attributed. Limiting the use of honorary and ghost authorship, or abandoning the practice all together, will ensure the proper and ethical assigning of authorship to a paper.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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