

Unconsented acknowledgments as a form of authorship abuse: What can be done about it?

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Abstract

Unwelcome or unconsented acknowledgments is an unethical practice seldom addressed. It constitutes a form of authorship abuse perpetrated in the acknowledgments section of published research, where the victim is credited as having made a contribution to the paper, without having given their consent, and often without having seen a draft of the paper. The acknowledgment may be written in such a way as to imply endorsement of the study's data and conclusions. Through a real-life case, this paper explores the issue of unconsented acknowledgments and makes recommendations to prevent its occurrence, thereby promoting research integrity.

Keywords

Acknowledgments, authorship, editorial misconduct, ethics, research integrity

Abuses in authorship, such as redundant publication, ghost authorships, and coerced or hostage authorship, have received well-deserved attention lately (Bülow and Helgesson, 2018; Tang, 2018; Tarkang et al., 2017). Although less conspicuous than forms of gross research misconduct—including falsification, data fabrication, and plagiarism—that garner national headlines when uncovered, abuses in authorship appear to be common and pervasive (De Vries et al., 2006).

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Concerns about authorship in scholarly publications, that is, who does and does not merit to be considered an author, have been around for decades (Street et al., 2010). The increase in the number of authors per paper became a matter of serious concern in the early 1990s (Rennie and Flanagan, 1994), and continues to be so today. Unethical practices such as awarding co-authorship to a person who has not contributed significantly to a study, euphemistically labeled as *honorary* authorship, *gift* authorship, *guest* authorship, *gratuitous* authorship, or *prestige* authorship (Tarkang et al., 2017), have proven difficult to eradicate. The most devious form of authorship abuse, however, is *hostage* authorship, a form of coerced authorship in which an undeserving person exerts their power to threaten or imply that unless they are named as an author, they will prevent the study from being published (Bülow and Helgesson, 2018; Strange, 2008). But abuses related to authorship issues can adopt other, more subtle forms than coerced authorship, for example, via the acknowledgments section in published research papers.

The acknowledgments section in published research may appear to be quite harmless, included as a courtesy, to thank those who provided help during the research or writing process (Day and Gastel, 2011). However, it has also been the focus of bitter disputes concerning the blurred relationship between authorship and simple collaboration (Hyland, 2004; Rennie et al., 1997). While co-authorship implies active partnership, being acknowledged suggests mere assistantship, a subordinate position (Cronin, 1995). The issue here is that some contributors who should have been included as genuine authors may find themselves unmentioned (Jeffery and Fries, 2011; Sandler and Russell, 2005) or merely included in the acknowledgments section of a paper.

The acknowledgments section may also be corrupted in a subtler way, as when an author overstates the contribution of another researcher by using their name without consent, to lend greater credibility to his or her work. In that sense, an acknowledgment, through its message and meta-message, can become a vehicle for opportunistic behavior and “manipulative strategizing” (Ben-Ari, 1987: 72), such as when it implies that the acknowledged individual is a responsible party, when they are not.

Acknowledgments can also seek to diffuse an author’s responsibility by assigning credit to someone else (Day and Gastel, 2011; Giannoni, 2002). A classic example of an unwelcome acknowledgment is the account offered by Chatfield (2002), who received an off-print in which he was thanked for statistical advice, even though he had not seen the paper in either draft or final form. He explained the cause of his concern:

I was therefore not pleased to find at least one terrible statistical feature of the paper, namely some inappropriate graphs, incorrectly described as histograms which purported to show differences between group means. Presumably the refereeing process also bypassed statistical advice, possibly because a statistician appeared in the acknowledgments. (p. 16)

Chatfield's final comment above indicates how acknowledgments may contribute to diluting an author's responsibility and adding face validity to a weak study, in this case by naming him, a renowned statistician. The matter goes beyond simple etiquette. Day and Gastel (2011: 77) warn that it is "not good ethics. . . to phrase the acknowledgments in a way that seemingly denotes endorsement."

To avoid such forms of abuse, editors have been advised to request written consent from those who will be mentioned in the acknowledgments section (Day and Gastel, 2011; ICMJE, 2019; Oberlander and Spencer, 2006; Tarkang et al., 2017). Yet not all editors follow this advice.

Any researcher may become the victim of an unconsented acknowledgment. In this form of abuse, a person (usually a colleague of the author) who has not contributed to the published research, finds himself or herself identified by name (as opposed to being thanked as an "anonymous reviewer") and being "credited" for a contribution to the paper without having given their prior consent, and often without having seen a draft or final paper.

Some journals and associations have made recommendations on this issue with those in the biomedical field having been the most explicit about the need to avoid abuses in acknowledgments. For instance, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors first addressed the problem in the early 1980s (ICMJE, 1982). Undoubtedly, there is general agreement that formally acknowledging individuals to gain credibility or thanking individuals without their prior consent is unacceptable publication practice (Tarkang et al., 2017). Worse still is acknowledging individuals who have expressed their wish not to be thanked or associated in any way with a study. This would constitute an extreme form of abusive acknowledgment.

This article describes and discusses a case of unconsented acknowledgment. As this unethical practice is seldom addressed in the research literature, the aim of this paper is to raise awareness of its occurrence and potential preventive measures through examination of a real-life case of abusive acknowledgment in a prestigious journal. For legal reasons, names and other information that could reveal the identity of the journal, publisher, author, and editor have been removed.

The case

The protagonists are Nick (the author of the paper), Dave (the chief editor of the journal), and Maria (the victim).

Nick and Maria met at a conference where Nick was presenting. After the presentation, Maria approached him and suggested ways in which he could continue to further analyze his data. They kept in touch and, since statistical design and data analysis was not one of his strengths, Nick asked her to collaborate with him. Although the topic was only tangentially related to her specific line of research, Maria accepted.

The topic of Nick's research was somewhat controversial in the US. An author of several books and papers on the subject, he was a well-known and vocal advocate of one of the factions in the debate. Maria felt that their working relationship was relatively fluid, although not devoid of tensions. She appreciated his efforts but believed him to have a tendency to overstate findings and felt driven to correct some of his statements. When it came to errors, Maria was inclined to err on the side of caution.

The paper was ultimately accepted by a prestigious journal, pending minor revisions and requests for clarification. However, when responding to one of the reviewers' requests for clarification, Maria realized she had made an error in some estimates that were crucial to the analyses and was of the opinion that these should be redone. She described the problem to Nick, but he argued that errors were made every day and that they should proceed with publication. Maria was not happy about this believing it one thing is to make a mistake and not realize it, and another to know there is a mistake and ignore it.

Having failed to convince Nick that they should redo the analysis, Maria informed Nick that she would be stepping down as coauthor. She also informed Dave, the editor, citing irreconcilable differences in approach to addressing the reviewers' comments and alerting him to the error.

Dave encouraged Maria to continue working with Nick to find a solution. With some hesitation, Maria made further attempts to collaborate with Nick, but it became apparent that he was not willing to do so, and he moved forward with sole authorship of the paper. Maria felt relieved.

Months went by, then 1 day Maria received a system-based notice from the journal stating that the paper had been resubmitted. She wrote to Dave and asked him politely to make sure she was not listed as coauthor. She also stated explicitly that she did not want to be mentioned at all in the paper, including in the acknowledgments. An assistant editor responded with assurance that her name had now been removed from the list of authors.

Maria considered the episode over. However, when the new version of the paper was published, she was shocked to see that she was mentioned in the acknowledgments section in a way that cleverly implied her endorsement.

Maria—the sole acknowledgee—was identified along with her institutional affiliation. She was credited with the project being “her idea originally” and for “participating in the planning and execution of the project,” in addition to “providing essential support, encouragement, and resources”. The acknowledgment concluded by stating that “the work would not have been completed without her abundant knowledge, experience and guidance.”

Furthermore, there was no caveat to express that any errors in the study were the author's own, and the plural form “we,” appeared throughout the paper as if there was more than one author.

In shock, Maria wrote a brief message to Nick stating that his acknowledgments were completely inappropriate under the circumstances and that she would contact the editor to ask him to delete the mention to her name and affiliation in the paper. Neither the editor nor Nick responded.

After five unanswered messages to the Editor, including a commentary on Nick's paper and a request for a disclaimer of responsibility, Maria wrote to the nine members of the journal's board. Following advice from one that she forward a complaint directly to officials at the publishing conglomerate, Maria received a prompt reply confirming that her request would be forwarded to the company's legal and production teams for resolution.

A month later, Maria wrote again to inquire about the status of her request and an official at the publishing conglomerate informed her that Nick's misleading acknowledgment had been removed from the journal article. The paragraph was simply eliminated without traceability, and no further explanation was offered.

Discussion

Research integrity can be compromised in the seemingly innocuous acknowledgment section, traditionally conceived as a venue for scholarly courtesy. While Nick's motives in writing the misleading acknowledgment appear easy to surmise—that is, to denote endorsement of the paper by Maria and dilute his responsibility in the analysis and interpretation of the data—the journal editor's motives are less clear. Why would Dave choose to ignore Maria's repeated requests to delete the acknowledgment?

It is expected that editors should be receptive and willing to take action to prevent and correct research misconduct but not all take up the challenge. In Maria's case, the editor did not take the kind of corrective measures espoused by the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE, 2011), which affirms that editors should "always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed" (p. 1), even though the journal was affiliated to COPE. While most editors are ethical in their conduct, some abuse their editorial powers (Gitanjali, 2012; Roth, 2002), yet few authors dare speak out against them because of fear they might use their position and status to influence future efforts to publish. Part of the problem is that most journal boards do not provide oversight or an appeal process (Light and Warburton, 2008).

If the journal board had been more powerful, Maria's appeal to the board might have proved successful. Having an individual or a regulatory body appointed in the role of ombudsman might help to prevent abuses, making editors more accountable and likely to live up to their duties and obligations (Gitanjali, 2012; Roth, 2002; Teixeira and da Costa, 2010). As the case shows, a potential venue to overcome the power imbalance between researchers and journal editors when boards

do not provide oversight or an appeal process may lie in the publishing conglomerate, if the journal is part of one.

If the research community simply assumes that acknowledgment abuse, in all its forms, is a rare and minor problem, it is unlikely to be eradicated. Acknowledgment abuse may appear at first sight as a relatively minor transgression compared to coerced or hostage authorship, yet the emotional impact of acknowledgment abuse should not be understated. In cases of acknowledgment abuse, the perpetrator is often a friend or an esteemed colleague (Day and Gastel, 2011), as described in this case, which is not necessarily so in coerced or hostage authorship conflicts, where the misdeed usually involves supervisors or superiors (Bülow and Helgesson, 2018).

In two additional important aspects, acknowledgment abuse differs from other forms of authorship abuse: first, in the degree of control that the victim has in the situation, and second, in the ease with which measures can be implemented to curb it.

In terms of degree of control, when it comes to acknowledgment abuse, victims are virtually defenseless and do not have a say in the matter. Like Maria they find themselves as simple pawns, used and taken advantage of by others who control the game. Acknowledgment abuse is most often carried out without their knowledge, and when they become aware of it, the article is already published and there is little they can do about it. Even if detected in a timely manner, as in Maria's case, the author and the journal editor may choose to ignore it. Thus, in terms of vulnerability, the victim of acknowledgment abuse may be more powerless than the victim of hostage authorship. At least the latter can ultimately refuse to yield, as Tang (2018) suggests, even though by taking a moral stance they may face active interference to publish the paper and other reprisals.

Second, compared to other forms of authorship transgressions, acknowledgment abuse appears easier to prevent. If adequately enforced, ICMJE's advice to editors "that the corresponding author obtain written permission to be acknowledged from all acknowledged individuals" (ICMJE, 2019: 3) would eradicate this form of abuse. Journal submission guidelines and author's checklists could include consent forms for acknowledgments, and the editorial and production staff at the journal could be required to ensure that all such consents are filed along with other permissions (i.e. for use of extended quotations, exhibits, etc.) and other relevant documents that are part of the standard editorial procedures.

Publishing conglomerates could and should play a role too by enforcing the requirement of acknowledgment consent at the journal level.

Future research and practice

Acknowledgments can be honest and merited; but they can also be corrupted and become a vehicle for opportunistic behavior and manipulative strategizing (Ben-Ari,

1987). A quarter of a century ago, Cronin (1995) raised a host of issues and research questions relating to acknowledgment behavior that are still valid. Among them, he asked: What are the norms that govern acknowledgment behavior? How are these taught and monitored? What (if any) sanctions exist and are they invoked, if ever, to deal with acknowledgment transgressions? Is there transdisciplinary consistency in acknowledgment behavior?

Primary research—qualitative and quantitative—on the acknowledgment practices of authors and journals would constitute a first step for learning and raising awareness about the need to prevent abuses. Studies could address the actual prevalence of misconduct in the acknowledgments section, how it affects victims, and how editors from different fields perceive and address this issue.

Prevention and control of acknowledgment abuse should be feasible if large publishing conglomerates commit to it. The message should be that written acknowledgment consent is a requirement for publication. If enforced, this practice would be a small yet important step toward building a research culture of greater integrity.

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